

Stolen Worlds: Fijiindian Fragments

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Whatever our perspective on the girit experience, there's no doubt in my mind that the girit people gave us our history and heritage, our culture and community; indeed by sailing in a new direction they discovered and created a whole new world for us.

Satendra Nandan

Satendra Nandan's forward reflects on the long arduous journey of the first giriters, an ordeal that one could not possibly imagine. Scared, terrified, they made their journey across the *kala pani* (black waters) leaving behind their personal and collective histories, to begin a new life and create a new history. *My great grandfather Jari was born in India and came to Fiji on the first indenture ship, Leonidas, in 1879. My grandfather Ram Khelawan and father, Ram Sundar, were both born in Fiji in the Nakauvadra mountains, a remote part of Vitilevu. My father, two uncles and two aunts lived together as an extended family.* So begins the account of Krishna Prasad in his piece, 'Katherine: A New Home'. Prasad has moved on, to a new home; a new way of life - the struggles of his father, grandfather and great grandfather have not been in vain. He left Fiji in the mid-seventies for an opportunity in Australia too good to turn down. But Fiji remains a part of him, imbedded into who he is, it is his identity and the visits back home and extended family keep him connected to the land of his ancestors.

This is an important book in Indo-Fijian diasporic writing. Here, many years later the descendents of the giriters tell their stories, albeit from afar, of the land that was once home to their parents and grandparents. For most if not all of them, Fiji is now no longer their home, yet the memories are strong and they linger, difficult to erase, for theirs is a history tinged with some bitterness emanating from the political upheavals of 1987 and 2000. For many of them, this was why they left, they had become marginal-

ised, second class citizens in a country they thought they were part of, a country they thought and believed they belonged to. Instead the country made no apology for the pain and sufferings it had caused to a people who helped build this country and whose love, commitment and sacrifice was as deep as the ocean of this Pacific country.

There are quite a few accounts of those who grew up in the sugar cane belt areas and whose lives are woven into that history, for the history of the sugar industry is inextricably linked to the history of the Indo-Fijians. The sugar industry was the impetus behind the importation of indentured labour from India. Now, well over a hundred years later we have the expiry of sugar cane land leases that have displaced a large number of farmers and their families. What emerges as I read through the stories of those from the sugar belt areas, is that a history is coming to an end, and in a number of cases, the lack of regard by the various governments and institutions to the plight of farmers leaves me wondering of what is going to happen to an industry that has been the backbone of this country's economy for well over a hundred years. That by any account is very significant. The stories of men and women who have toiled the land and whose lives are so rooted in the soil is a reminder of just how far we have come but more importantly how far their children and grandchildren have come, to make this country what it is today. I have no doubt that as each of these writers began the process of writing and recalling the memories, a few tears would have been shed, for perhaps it is the first time they have had to do a retrospective on their own individual histories. What is so poignant is that family and friends have separated and continue to do so. What we are seeing then is the slow demise of a way of life that has existed for a long time. This will never be resurrected again.

The book is a memory, a memory of a country so dearly loved yet at the same time filled with bitterness and tinged with a great deal of sadness. But in spite of this there is also joy and happiness and the memories of these occasions balance the sadness and the bitterness. You can't help but be moved by some of these stories.

Remembering and not forgetting is the true art of living, writes Satendra Nandan in his Forward, 'Ancestors: Distant Mirrors'. These are memories of our histories, of our lives and of a country we love to hate yet love so very dearly. Nandan reminds us that we must never forget, for much is owed to the ancestors. Vijendra Kumar's 'Fiji Times: Brief Lives' is perhaps an introduction to the central theme of the book, growing up as a child in rural Fiji, whether it be in Sabeto in Nadi, Ba or in the interior of Labasa it is the same, there was struggle and hardship. His is an amazing story of

perseverance and courage, and though he may not have realized at the time, his dedication and commitment to his work and what he wanted to be, was rewarded years later when he became the first local editor of the Fiji Times. His piece is insightful in that it reveals that the kind of mentoring and friendship he grew up with, just doesn't seem to exist too much these days. There aren't too many good role models around to guide and keep us 'on track'. The scholarly and quite learned Kumar, like his good editorials, leaves one reflective and inspired.

I lived in a small village community where everyone knew each other well and joined in their sorrows and celebrations. I remember attending the wedding in our village, going to the temple to watch firewalking, having pallou at Mr Mohammed's house, eating South Indian dishes on banana leaves at Mr Pillay's house, eating halwa handed over to us by Mr Singh from the Gurudwara while Mr Manasa supplied us with fish, coconuts and breadfruits. This is what Sushma Anand writes in 'Away : First Flight'. This is her memory, a very strong and vivid one. She will always be grateful to that early life and upbringing. That is what moulded her to what she is today. Now she lives in Brisbane, Australia and while that is where she resides, Fiji for her is still home.

Others have views that on reflection, wished somehow, it could have been different, perhaps this country would not have had the problems it is beset with if there was more integration and a vision that could carry us forward. In Divakar Rao's 'Vitidays: An Indian Passage' he writes, *It would be a sad commentary on Fiji society if it did not evolve into something more homogenous and wholesome. If Fijians, Indians, Chinese and Europeans had gone to school together for the past century, we would have witnessed a lot more inter-racial marriages between people of Fijian, Indian, European and Chinese origins. Under these circumstances there would have been less likelihood of racial polarisation than we now witness.* This lament, of what this country could be, is felt not only by this writer but also by others throughout the book. The poignancy of the lament is felt as some reflect on the political upheavals of 1987 and 2000. What distinguishes the Indo-Fijian migrant from any other, is that many left this small country, a country whose ancestors helped build and develop and whose histories are deeply etched in the fabric of what Fiji is today. It is that history, of struggle and hardship and perseverance that is so difficult to forget.

As someone asked, is it fate that the coups happened? This has forced a large number of people to move and make a new life abroad where opportunities have made them prosper. Now they can afford to pay for their parents to travel, the same writer says. A coup can never be justified yet some-

how in this case it has forced people to move and has created a great deal of mobility in people who otherwise may not have left their little village or town, content, just to be. And perhaps it is the memory of what could be that Ravindran Robin Nair feels when he writes, . . . *I knew then as I know now that a home in an adopted country never replaces a home in your homeland. The pain of separation from one's homeland dims but never separates from your inner being.* There are no more greetings from passers-by as one sits on the verandah drinking spicy, sweet milky tea, watching the children play in the yard as the smell of curries and fried fish wafts through the settlement. Yet there is still a conscience sometimes full of guilt and shame of having left, abandoning a country that gave you so much and this is what Nair struggles with, this feeling of guilt. He writes, *I was a little ashamed that I was beginning to think selfishly about my individual life at the expense of my own people who I was attempting to leave behind in Fiji. Fiji needed educated citizens like me to work through the community turmoil that was to engulf our country. I had great admiration and respect for those fellow Indian Fijians who had the opportunity to leave Fiji for greener pastures overseas but remained at home. They were committed to struggle for a better Fiji for all in conjunction with safeguarding the interests of the Indian Fijian community, who were still predominantly poor farmers. Was I being tempted to take a soft alternative?*

Nair's account of high school in the upper sixth form in Suva Grammar reveals the somewhat stark reality of the segregation of the two major races back in the days of colonial rule. Here they were, two major ethnic groups studying side by side but not together. His account of his half-Fijian cousins is quite moving and filled with a regret that will remain with him always. The attitude of Indians then to inter-ethnic marriage was greatly frowned upon (also I might add by indigenous Fijians too) and to break that barrier risked being ostracized by your family, as was the case of his uncle. While there has been some liberal acknowledgement of this, it is still not wholly accepted. The irony of course is from Nair himself marrying a non-Indian. His children are mixed race, like that of his own cousins who at that time were relegated to kitchen duties, appearing to almost be like, untouchables.

Sulochana Chand's 'Levuka: An Island Lost' evokes strong images of the old capital the story of her family and her uncle appear quite surreal. Christine Singh's, 'Flagstaff: Nani's Home' is filled with joyous memories, and who could ever forget her nani, this incredible part European woman whom I would often see in the bus and always dressed in a sari. I remember her so clearly from my own childhood that I couldn't help but feel con-

nected somehow to this story as I also went to school with some of her brothers and sisters. But the Singhs are well known and somehow one could never imagine Flagstaff without them. The house is still there, now occupied by Alex.

The accounts are varied and as you read each story you can't help but feel that you are entering a world that once existed and is no longer. Wherever they are, whether in the United States of America, Canada, Australia or New Zealand, these writers have a connection that binds them all together and their collective memories of Fiji, their original home, will always remain with them for a very long time.

While these memories are there and still vivid the time has come to record it for posterity, and what better way than in a collection such as this. No doubt a trend has begun on writing about the Indo-Fijian or the Fiji Indian diaspora and some of these writers have already begun to tell their stories. There is no doubt that a new breed of writers will emerge to follow in the footsteps of the pioneering writers, Subramani, Satendra Nandan, Raymond Pillai and others.

This is an important book, one that could easily be used as a text at university or high school, though I think the latter would be more beneficial to expose young minds to the struggle, hardships and survival of the early Indian migrants. The stories in this collection are inspirational as it reflects the success of each of these writers and how they have overcome the struggles and adversity in order to become successful. They now continue the journey of their ancestors. There is however, one trifling point: one of the 'dangers' of personal accounts is that it can become too protracted thus too often losing the focus as the need to say too much becomes acute and digression sets in. Interest of course wanes and a number of the pieces in the collection will suffer from that. Some of the stories could have been shortened considerably to allow for a collection that does not become too repetitious in parts, becoming a variation of the same themes.

Kavita Nandan asks the question, *Why has it become even more important for us to write about Fiji now? Naipaul brought the Caribbean island of Trinidad to life; both he and Salman Rushdie have imagined India in ways that no politician or historian could.* She partly answers her own question, *Fiji is a relatively unimagined place, often represented as a tourist destination.* It is still a major South Pacific tourist destination but earning a name for herself as the land of coups. The reason to write has always been there but with the political upheavals of the last 17 years there is a stronger sense of the need to express what has happened and occurred in this country in the last 17 years and even in the last hundred years. It is time

the world knew Fiji not because of its coups and political turmoil but of its history, the history of a people who have helped build this country to what it is today. That and more, is what the world needs to know. This book is the beginning to serving that very purpose.

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