14 May 1987: An Enigma of Exile

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I left Nandi Airport in December 1987. It was to be the longest journey of my life: I was leaving my country. No journey is ever longer, and behind me lay my childhood landscape of little ruins.

As I showed my passport to a pugnacious-looking official, I was asked to step aside. He had to check with the military regime to find out if I was allowed to leave the country – *my* country, that is. The country where I was born, had been an MP for five years, had fought and won two exhilarating elections and had become Minister for Health and Social Welfare in Prime Minister Timoci Bavadra's genuinely multi-racial cabinet – the first in the history of Fiji.

That one hour at the airport was a long wait. My wife and two daughters sat anxiously in the departure lounge. The official had deliberately forgotten me.

When the departure of the Air Pacific flight was finally announced, I joined the eager queue of passengers of cheated hopes. As I fastened the seat belt, I wondered if someone would come and take me off the plane. It had happened before, to my political colleagues.

The Air Pacific flight was airborne at last. People used to call it "Air Pathetic" for its service and yet this morning, for me and many others, this much maligned airline was our flight to freedom from a country's Royal Military Forces which had abducted and detained a whole government.

For five treacherous nights, with all lights blazing, we had glimpsed the heart of darkness.

In the bright sunlight the plane circled over my childhood village. I once grazed cattle on that stony patch of land before it became a tourist tarmac. I felt as though I was leaving a cremation ground just as the embers were dying and the ashes took over. I looked across at my wife, Jyoti, and at my two daughters, Gitanjali and Kavita, and the vast, alive ocean below, marbled in the sunlight.

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I hadn't even said goodbye to my brothers or sisters, except the one brother with whom I had spent the previous night. He had dropped us at the airport and gone to work at Vuda Point, where the first Fijians were supposed to have landed. The myths in paradise are many.

Thirty thousand feet above, I was facing the one terrible reality of my own life: exile.

And like the blood from a ruptured artery, the haemorrhage of exodus would continue, planeload by planeload.

Two days before, around 10am, I had driven alone to the gates of the Queen Elizabeth Barracks, the headquarters and home of the Royal Fiji Military Forces – still "royal" after two treasonable coups, one on 14 May, the other on 25 September.

It was here that Dr Bavadra, his Cabinet and the Government MPs were first confined after their fateful abduction from Fiji's Parliament on May 14, 1987, at 10.10am.

I parked my car and walked up to the gate. A soldier gruffly asked, "Yes?"

I introduced myself and stated that I needed to see the commander-in-charge.

The soldier rang somewhere as I waited outside, scrutinising the decrepit building in which we had been interned for three brutal hours staring at the grim concrete floor on which we had sat and on which some had wept so bitterly.

"Sir, the officer will see you. Please come with me."

We marched towards the Officers' Mess. By now several soldiers were whispering amongst themselves, casting furtive glances towards me.

Between our cell of imprisonment and the Officers' Mess, on a gentle slope, there was another building. I hadn't noticed it on the day of the coup. Today it was there, neat and tidy, full of soldiers and officers in uniform. I was taken into a room and given a chair on which to sit.

In a few minutes an officer appeared, looking important, well-fed. He extended his hand to me warmly and with a handsome smile.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked. I explained: my family and I were booked to leave on Thursday morning for Sydney, and thence to Canberra. (People like me had to get permission to travel outside Fiji.) I had applied a month earlier, but two days before departure I hadn't received any reply from the Suva Police, now under military control.

Immediately the officer rang somebody and there was an agitated conversation lasting about fifteen minutes. Then he put the phone down, smiled at me, and said: "All is okay, sir. You can leave on Thursday."

"What about a letter?" I asked anxiously. There was no need, he replied; my name had been struck off the dreaded computer. I was escorted out with great courtesy and the gates closed behind me.

Six months before, Thursday, May 14, I had to be at the Fiji Broadcasting Commission by 8.30am – I was being interviewed on a talk-back radio in Hindi for about an hour. As new ministers from the Coalition, we were being introduced to the

public, and our government's new policies had to be publicised and scrutinised by the people.

Half-way in April, two days after our stunning electoral victory, Prime Minister Bavadra had called me to his office and had offered me the Health Ministry. Sitting on his prime ministerial chair, he had laughed and said to me, "Satend, I'm giving you the shit ministry!"

I accepted it with some trepidation: my younger brother, a medical practitioner and the President of the Fiji Medical Association, had warned me of the cholesterol of indecisions and maladministration that flowed in the veins of the Health Department. Yet Health was, I felt, a ministry one could do a lot of good in. To heal the sick, care for the wounded, to clean the place of healing for the sick and the aged. Besides, I would have a direct line to the PM, a medical man himself.

I had not seen politics as a power game: I'd visualised it as an act of faith to change society and to care for those who needed care. And parliamentary democracy I saw as an exciting and ingenious institution, not so much for its freedoms and responsibilities as for the power it gave to the ordinary people to throw a government *out* of power!

So here I was: a Minister for Health, Social Welfare and Women's Affairs on the Coalition's front bench, having won two elections – the first by 94.5 per cent of the votes; the second, in a new constituency, by 89.9 per cent. In the second election our fate – and Fiji's – had hung in the balance by four national seats: two in Suva and two in my former constituency. But by eleven that April Sunday, Fiji and the world knew we had won the crucial seats. Labour-NFP Coalition 28, the Alliance 24.

It was a glorious victory: a new dawn had broken. Or so we thought and so I said on the radio. The sea looked calm; the faces of a few former ministers – presumably worried about corrupt practices and the skeletons in their roomy cupboards – looked drained and crestfallen. At least one former minister of the Alliance Government, having made his money at the cost of the poor in Fiji, was now enjoying his last days on Queensland's Gold Coast, under a most corrupt state government in Australia and a peanut-seller for premier.

Within a month we had done more in restoring the faith of the people in good governance than the whole of the Alliance's seventeen years in office. I do not think I've ever worked harder in my life than during those thirty-three days. Ratu Mara, who had begun with the best goodwill in the world, had remained too long in the office.

So the morning of 14 May 1987, I sat in the studio of the Fiji Broadcasting Commission. I remember reflecting that one hundred and eight years ago to the day, the first indentured Indians had sailed into Fiji archipelago in the *Leonidas* from Calcutta. They were crossing the dark waters: unknown, unknowing. Many had never seen an ocean-wave; they were being transplanted on some of the smallest islands in the largest ocean on the planet.

The journey had begun in 1879 when Gandhi was ten years old and concluded forty years later after more than 60,000 "coolies" had been transported to Fiji. I was

not to know then, but that very day, one hundred and eight years later, the journey was to begin again – for their great, great-grandchildren, and to other shores with a new and devastating knowledge.

And one thing, I remember thinking in that studio, impressed me particularly about my country, Fiji: I've not known of any country where a migrant race, which came not as colonisers but as victims of colonialism, did so much to protect the indigenous way of life. Today in Fiji, the native Fijians own eighty-five per cent of all land; they had more seats in the Parliament, more ministers and top government positions, and at any time more money spent on their education. (On the day of coup in the Fiji Parliament, the Governor General, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the House and, for the first time, even the Leader of the Opposition, were all Fijians.) I told myself the Fijians are, in short, the most privileged indigenous community in the world. The sweat and suffering of the Indian migrants had ensured for them a future with a sense of wholeness, direction and pride.

Our world in Fiji, like many others, has been full of cannibalism and colonialism, savagery and slavery, convictism and coolism, ethnic cleaning and racism, religious bigotry and intellectual dishonesty, moral hypocrisy and political treachery – these ills have been integral to our seascape. But I always thought that racial politics was no more than a legacy or relic of the colonial era.

Personally, I had known very little of it.

Growing up in Fiji, on the banks of the river Nandi across from a Fijian *koro*, we village children all swam together, grazed our cattle on the same riparian fields, ate the same stolen coconuts, pawpaws and watermelons. My parents sat and drank grog with Fijians every night and ate from the same plate. There was Lesu, Blooma, Kini, Anna, with whom we swam in the Nandi from dawn to dusk. Matalita, Ilmeleki, Solomoni were the names of some people with whom my paternal grandfather and my parents joked, laughed and worked. Much of the work on our farm was done by Fijians for sugar and tea leaves and Indian rice and curry which my mother cooked in abundance. Fiji always has had abundance of food; certainly in our village.

Race then was unimportant to us. We were unaware of its many manifestations. Fiji in that sense was paradise enough. Yet all the while Satan and his serpents were enjoying the security and sinecures of the colonial service. And the rarefied racism of the colonial encounter was lost in the myths of Eden in the South Seas….

Only now do I know that indigenous racism, like local liquor, is worse than the imported variety. By April 1987 we in the Coalition were succeeding rather too well in creating faith in a multicultural society; indeed, we had achieved the unimaginable: political victory on a racialist constitution designed to keep a feudal and colonial hierarchy perpetually in power.

Anyway, that morning, May 14, on the radio talk-back show a number of people rang in to ask what the Health Minister would be doing to alleviate their suffering, to increase their welfare payments and improve the conditions of service in

the hospitals and nursing centres. I replied sincerely but perhaps a bit glibly: I was conscious that the Labour-NFP Coalition had won the election on the sheer power of words, both written and oral.

The one voice I now recall was that of an old Sikh farmer, from Ba. In my childhood I grew up by the river with a village full of Sikhs. Hardworking and healthy people; never a beggar among them – even in India. This old man talked in broken Hindi, with tears in his aged voice, of his joy at our winning the election. It is for men and women like these – the "dumb thousands" in Fiji who till their rented farms and in the evening sit and drink yaqona or a bottle of Fiji Bitter with their companions – that some of us had entered politics. And after one hundred years of servitude, here, they must have felt, was their government. It's amazing the faith words generate, even in those who do not know you personally.

At the end of the talk-back session, around 9.20am, my host asked me which record I wanted played before I left for Parliament. On the table I saw one by S.D. Burman. The song played was:

O' Musafir jayega kahan,
Waha kawn hei tera…

O, Traveller, where'll you go now
Who is there that is yours…

From the Fiji Broadcasting Commission I entered the Parliament at exactly 9.30am. The parliamentary chamber in Fiji is small but solid – a part of the old Government Building in which the Supreme Court is also housed, and, below the Ministry of Finance, the Office of the Opposition. The Speaker's Chair is very artistically carved, and was presented to the Parliament by the Government of India, presumably at the time of independence, in 1970. A couple of portraits of English Royalty – a king and a queen – hang rather incongruously in the tropical surrounding, colourful but very distant.

On the front bench Joeli Kalou, the Minister for Labour and Immigration, sat on my left, and Dr Tupeni Baba, the Minister of Education, on my right. The Speaker – an Alliance member, Militoni Leweniqila – followed the mace with a rather dirty looking wig on his dishevelled greying hair. After the prayer, which we all intoned meaninglessly, we said "Amen" and sat down.

A toady character of the Opposition got up to speak, and began uttering some nonsense as his maiden speech. As I moved to leave my seat to signal my disgust, I was handed a note from the Minister of Finance to draft the reply for one of our colleagues. I had just written the first sentence when the toady said something insulting to Joeli which made me interject: "Address the Chair, you larrikin!"

The *Hansard* records the next moment thus: *A stranger walks in.…*

When I lifted my head I saw the Colonel, neatly dressed in civilian clothes. Behind him, masked gunmen were entering Parliament and some through the low windows. They were wearing gasmasks.

My words "Address the Chair, you larrikin!" remain the last legitimate words of the Fiji Parliament, as we had known it.

The previous Sunday night I had had a dream. A man with a gasmask had come into my bedroom and was pointing a gun at me. I woke up, my heart palpitating. The curious thing is that I don't think I had ever seen a gasmask in real life, and then, on Sunday, here was my first nightmare of it. And on Thursday I was seeing several, of all places, in the Parliament of Fiji.

We followed Dr Bavadra, one by one, out of Parliament. The soldiers had their guns cocked.

One by one we were shoved into two army trucks and driven off. The soldiers had their masks to hide behind.

As we were driven through Raiwaqa, one of the poorest slums of urban Suva – by its people's votes our party had won two of the four critical seats – no-one appeared to notice that a drama of momentous proportions was being enacted. People went about their tasks normally, avoiding puddles created by an early morning drizzle.

In the back of the truck, with the soldier's gun always at the ready, none of us thought of escaping. There was no talk. One lawyer-politician was cradling in his lap a huge tome: Erskine May's *Parliamentary Practice*. I took it from him to look for the word "coup." It wasn't mentioned. The only one comment, quietly expressed, came from an Indian MP. He said to me: "This is a conquest of one race by another."

In another fifteen minutes we were inside the iron gates of the Queen Elizabeth Barracks. A new Labour politician whispered to me: "Doc, don't be alarmed. I think it's just a rehearsal; in case of some problems in Parliament…." Such innocence.

As we slid out of the truck, we were surrounded by a swarm of armed soldiers, all deeply agitated and mumbling to each other. They herded us into a small building to the left of the entrance gates. I think it must have been erected to cell drunken soldiers for the night. Here they tried to push us into about eight small, urine-stinking cells. We refused to enter them.

The soldiers then attempted to force us in but the Prime Minister's voice grew louder and more authoritative. The royal soldiers were momentarily shocked and we remained in the front room. There was one broken chair, a kerosene drum, a bench, and a dirty phone on the window sill. The PM sat on the chair, a melancholy smile on his face. Two fierce-looking soldiers stood with their guns by the door. People began talking: the first sinking realisation that this was for real.

The phone began to ring: a scene from a Gestapo film. The response of the soldier who lifted it was subdued. He whispered in dark tones, the black receiver glued to his big ears.

We sat in that stuffy room, soldiers coming in and out menacingly, and the phone ringing intermittently and insidiously, with the knowledge that other small –

and not so small – dramas would be unfolding in our family homes. My wife, Jyoti, and daughter Kavita were listening to the only commercial radio when the incredible news flashed that the unimaginable had happened in Paradise: a coup in Parliament.

Then, an hour later, they were told I had been shot because of my verbal clash with the toady….

The shock of my exaggerated death to Jyoti still shatters me. And also the sorrow that men like Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka caused to so many innocent men, women and children.

By eleven am we were talking amongst ourselves and a wan smile could be traced on many faces. At least we were still together, and still alive. But the nation must have been in shock: this earthquake must have shaken every multistorey building and lean-to.

Around one pm, in small groups we were taken to the Officers' Mess on top of a hillock. A few curious people in the know had gathered at the entrance to the Royal Barracks, but the gates were firmly closed and a few soldiers stood guard with guns in the midday heat. We waved at a few recognisable faces: one I especially recall of a brave and courageous reporter of the *Fiji Times*. (It was that wave of mine to her that eventually reached my wife, telling her that I was alive, well and looking quite hungry.)

The Mess gave us the feeling that we were all okay: the view of the blue Pacific from the military hill was most reassuring. One trade unionist MP, who had been to Moscow, remembered the slogan: "Eat every meal as if it were your last." It had an immediate effect upon us. Having missed morning tea, we ate well, and enjoyed the excellent service.

After our lunch, which must have lasted at least two hours, we weren't taken back to the Black Hole, or Rabuka's Hole, as some had started calling it. We remained in the Mess. Some of us began playing pool, others dozed on comfortable chairs. Others still moved about the hall to see the range of trophies and photos of soldiers who had distinguished themselves in wars they had fought on behalf of the Empire.

I searched for a book. There wasn't one. So I sat and closed my eyes to the reality of what was happening around me. Those of us who were beginning to laugh and joke were told sternly to control their tongues and understand the "situation." In tight "situations" some human beings, like me, cannot bear too much reality. Others cannot bear too much hilarity.

As evening descended, the MPs came to life. A message had come through that we could contact our families by phone. There were two phones and, two by two, we moved; the older amongst us going first. Around 8.30pm I rang my brother Narendra's home. I knew by now Jyoti and my daughter would be there with his family. As soon as I'd dialled the number my wife picked it up. She must have been sitting by the phone the whole afternoon. "Well," I said, "we'll be shot at dawn tomorrow!" Jyoti was aghast; "Don't joke!" she said, but the timbre of her voice showed she was

thrilled and grateful to hear from me. I soon reassured her that all was well. Nothing to worry about and that everyone was fine, waiting for dinner to be served.

But we didn't get any dinner.

Around 10pm, when it was dark, and the lights were being flicked off in curtained rooms, we were again loaded in military jeeps and driven, doors shut, guns ready. We drove for about thirty minutes in a very dismal night.

As we alighted we were escorted into PM's *bure* where we were soon surrounded by soldiers in their heavy boots, guns and fatigues. Some looked sweaty and dark; some wore sock-masks over their heads – something I'd seen only on TV, worn by the IRA or terrorist groups about to blow up a plane or a home.

Adi Kuini, Dr Bavadra's wife, was there in the *bure* with a few of her family members. A prayer was said: first in Fijian then in Urdu, then in Hindi and finally in English. Adi Kuini produced a meal from somewhere and we began talking.

Food in Fiji does wonders in a crisis! For some absurd reason I began to think of my village and the younger members of the Fijian *koro*. We had a very affectionate relationship, sharing our roti and curry in exchange for pawpaws, coconuts and bananas. Most of these fruits grew wild on the rich alluvial soil on the banks of the river. Matalita in particular I had great respect for, as I was told by my mother that she'd been the midwife during my birth in the galvanised-iron and tin house.

She often came to borrow tea leaves and rice from my mother and brought in return a rich bundle of bananas. To this day, I haven't been able to resist a golden banana. And this led to some complications in my childhood. At least twice I was rushed to Nadi hospital because I had stuffed myself with bananas. Whenever the Nandi was in flood, our parents and neighbours would come to the bank of the river with sacks and collect bananas, coconuts, pawpaws and breadfruit floating in abundance towards the sea.

While everyone was busy filling the sacks, I was preoccupied in filling my young belly with bananas. So twice, much to the irritation of my elder brother, I was rushed on horseback to the hospital where the *vuniwai* gave me a laxative to release the tension. I was banned from the bank of the river on such future floods.

And now, I thought, we're flowing towards a banana republic!

There were a couple of phones in the prime ministerial *bure* and everyone began using them. Around midnight I rang a friend in a High Commission to tell her of our whereabouts; then I rang home, too. Around twelve-thirty I received a call from the editor of the *Fiji Times*, who informed me, with some amusement, that they were about to print a front-page story about my being shot. During a coup the innovation of the rumour machine is astounding. Truth is always stranger than fiction.

Soon afterwards the phones were suddenly cut, and several soldiers dashed in heavy boots and thudded straight into Dr Bavadra's bedroom. They were agitated. They talked very harshly to the PM and his wife. Someone from our group, we learned, had rung New Zealand and, presumably Australia, requesting military intervention. The army was worried: anything could happen with the Labour

governments of Australia and New Zealand – our fraternal colleagues, or so we believed. But nothing *did* happen and that is another story in itself.

The brutal interrogations of the PM lasted about an hour. We were then allowed to rest. Some MPs went to the several rooms for guests in front of the PM's *bure*, a few of us remained close to Dr Bavadra's bedroom, lying on the mat and sofas in our parliamentary suits – now crumpled like the spirits within them. If we went to the toilet, the soldiers followed us. Then slowly, one by one, we dozed off to sleep with the Foreign Minister's snoring soon dominating the night and our nightmare.

Around 2.30am I was awakened by the thud, thud sound of army boots. A gang of soldiers marched past, as I lay on a sofa, my eyes half-closed. They stormed into Dr Bavadra's bedroom and stayed for quite a while: one could hear their harsh and grating voices and the gentle, dignified tones of the Prime Minister.

I do not think Dr Bavadra ever recovered from the way his soldiers treated him. The rest of us were spared the pain which must have seared his brave, gentle heart. For the rest of the night I didn't sleep. After about forty-five minutes the soldiers tiptoed out like thieves who had burgled a sacred place. As their footsteps died in the darkness, one could faintly hear the barking of Suva's mongrel and unlicensed dogs.

It was, after all, their night.

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The people of Fiji are used to nature's disasters – hurricanes and floods – that destroy whole settlements. Hurricanes toss the islands like kites in a whirlwind. But after the tempest you will always see people emerging out of the torn thatched roofs of their fallen homes, saying *Bula* or *Ram Ram* or *Salaam*. Then, after a bowl of grog has been produced mysteriously from somewhere, they will settle down to digging holes for new posts, for a new home on another spot.

It is often said that Fiji had a bloodless coup. There is, of course, no such thing as bloodless coup. Every coup is like a heart attack: something inside is silently dying, the heart is haemorrhaging. Economic indicators or the manipulations of statistics cannot measure the rhythms of heartbeats. And people die of grief, betrayal and broken faith. But the indomitable spirit of a person has its own resilience. And the individual is the ray of light in Fiji.

They say flowers bloom in Hiroshima and bird songs are heard in Auschwitz. Fiji, too, is a link in that chain of being and becoming. No colonel can enchain a country or its conscience. And no guns can kill certain words and ideas.

Fiji, popularly known as the Cannibal Isles in colonial mythology, has miraculously managed to remain peaceful under severe bullying and violent provocations. That speaks for the quiet courage of the people of Fiji. I hope this remembrance of things past, flawed and fragmented though it is, will give the reader

an impression of a loving, little country. Every paradise has its Satan – its fallen angels.

And so, after two coups in Fiji, one on May 14, 1987 and the more fatal one on September 25 – the first imprisoning the Coalition out of government; the second forcing many Fiji Indians out of the country itself – I left the country of my birth on Christmas Eve, with death on my mind.

For most individuals, leaving their country is never an easy decision: one gets used to one's country as one gets accustomed to one's mother's body. Leaving the familiar and the familial is a wrench at the best of times. For me it was especially hard. My young grandfathers had indentured themselves from India to Fiji, where they married indentured women; my parents and all my brothers and sisters were born here. None of us knew any other land until I left to study in Delhi as a teenager. Before the first coup, not a single member of my extended family had ever migrated to another country.

The day after the coup – Friday 15 May, *Girmit* Day – went wondering and waiting. I began to look for books in the PM's house, or for magazines. All I found was a copy of *Cosmopolitan* – not the most exciting reading in a coup but distracting enough, I suppose. I also stole a few scraps of blank paper and started scribbling a few lines. Although they were confiscated (about 50-60 pages), a few fragments remained hidden in one of my socks:

> *Last night 15/5 slept around 11.30pm. Nitya, Sam, Krishna, Fida and I were in the PM's lounge; two on the floor, and three on the white settees. I said goodnight to PM around 11.15pm. We were not disturbed although we slept fitfully, the footfalls of yesternight echoing in our corridors of sleep.*
>
> *On Saturday, 16 May, I got up at 5.30am. Looked around. Nitya half-awake; Fida fast asleep; Sam snoring gently; K in full blast. He's sleeping face downwards – massive figure. First night I've slept. This has been the longest wake. What a word to think of. One can't get away from literary conceits; just as one can't run away from the nightmares of childhood. Two lights are glowing in the ceiling. I don't see any soldiers around. Poor chaps must have gone to sleep. Not used to this kind of duty in a Prime Minister's home. Soon a few enter the lounge from kitchen door. Some have kindly and gentle faces: one looks rather ferocious in his black mask. I can guess why he has to hide his face.*
>
> *6am: Almost all of us are awake. Nitya gets up with a smart crack about K's snoring but K is fully awake and protests vigorously with an emphatic lie! I'm not snoring! And slipped back into his sonorous rhythm. We begin our normal routine. Routine is essential for survival. MPs from the guest rooms start*

coming into the bure. *One or two look ashen but others are in good spirit. A very Kafkaesque situation.*

11am: PM enters the lounge with Reverend J. Koroi. We join in prayer. Rev Koroi is a gentle man, the army chaplain, and he has a very positive influence on the whole gathering. He urges us to be patient. The nation is praying for us and the Lord is with us. We bow our heads and pray together. I say a prayer to everyone's surprise, indeed to my own. A couple of soldiers are crying nestling their guns. Earlier Jo Nocola had prayed in the front room with tears in his voice. Towards the end of the prayer, Jo broke down and I saw a soldier quietly weeping. I feel no animosity towards the soldiers. They remain distant, courteous and silent. Orders, we gather are that they can't talk to us. Jo at the end read the passage from Acts Chapter 17, Verse 23, about the Unknown God: "For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, To the Unknown God. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you."

It's 1.15pm. As I'm writing this, pretending I'm copying something from Cosmopolitan, *I notice our Cabinet prayer lying on the desk. It reads: "Almighty God who in Thy wisdom and goodness has appointed Councils for the guidance and leadership of nations, we pray Thee send Thy Gracious blessing upon us Thy servants whom Thou has been pleased to call to be members of this Cabinet of Fiji. May Thy spirit be with us as we meet together. Grant us wisdom, diligence, justice and compassion in our deliberations and decisions; and may all that we do advance Thy honour and glory and promote peace and welfare of all the people of this land. Amen."*

We hear on the ABC news that a Council of Ministers has been formed and they are meeting to change the Constitution, without prayers presumably. We still have a radio to listen to. They have as yet not disconnected our radios. It is perhaps a clever ploy to keep us informed so that we may not plan desperate or dangerous moves which may force the army's hand? A political murder would change the scene so absolutely. I also realise the value of Radio Australia in a crisis. Radio Fiji is vomiting the coup propaganda and the English announcers are going on as if nothing has happened: same false gusto, the same monotonous tones.

Adi Kuini gives me a plate of roti and curry for lunch. She and the PM too have something to eat. As I'm scribbling, the PM is in a strong and relaxed mood. Kuini is looking regal in her shawl of sorrow. There are dark circles under her eyes. What she must have been through. But in a sense Kuini is lucky. She's with her husband and his colleagues. The pain of other wives

> *wondering about the fate of their husbands and expecting the worst is unimaginable.*

Another page I have here was partly written in the toilet:

> *Can't find a book to read. Can't go to toilet without one! Such bad habits can cause awful constipation. I ask one of the soldiers if there's a library in the house. "No," says he, shaking his puzzled head of hair. Must rectify the situation when we are in Government again! You can't have a Prime Ministerial house without books! I go to the toilet, nevertheless, with a few blank sheets of paper. After half an hour I come out, still constipated and two soldiers who had seen me writing ask for the sheets. I give them some written pages. I feel they should read my thoughts on their actions. Besides, writing makes things bearable and clarifies the "situation." Words can give tremendous distance and objectivity to events too close to the heart. And how inspiring that is. From one word to another we can grow in strength and love and become conscious of a shared destiny. I'm trying to be philosophical in a helpless situation. But several soldiers are moving up and down in the house. We are perhaps overguarded. Everyone is dozing off peacefully and there's no talk of any attempt to escape.*

Another fragment is my effort at writing a prayer:

> *Dearly Beloved Father*
>
> *It is thy gift that life's illusions must be shattered. I perceive a great gloom in my heart and in my brothers.*
>
> *But we are blessed that we are beginning this journey together. Not in the love and comradeship of brothers alone but with you. Abide with us always.*
>
> *It is only in aloneness that we discover ourselves, the quality of our humanity, the strength of our conviction, the depth of our faith and the truth of our vision. Here, as we move, we do not hear other footfalls: it is only the echo of our own.*
>
> *You have laid bare before us the path of our duty. You have given us this opportunity. I ask you to give each one of us the light to see beyond these dark clouds…..*

Below that fragment I've scribbled Wordsworth's lines from the "Immortality Ode":

> *Though nothing can bring back the hour*
> *Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;*
> *We will grieve not, rather find*

Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death;
In years that bring the philosophic mind…..

By Fiji standards and the opportunities open to my generation, my education has been rather remarkable. I should really have been a canecutter or a primary-school teacher or at best a customs officer at Nandi Airport checking extra bottles of duty-free whisky surreptitiously carried by overseas-trips-returning ministers and civil servants.

Only through education can one understand how, at great moments of crisis, momentous or personal, individuals and communities may derive strength from their literature, mythology, religious thought and art. Otherwise, it is difficult to measure the depths that a line of poetry can stir and touch. And it is equally difficult to imagine how the will to live, to survive and to struggle may come out of a single image. The metaphor of Christ on the cross; the odyssey of young Siddhartha leaving his kingdom, wife and child at midnight; the exile of Rama on the eve of his coronation; the tears of Ulysses by the shore after so many of his companions had been killed by the Cyclops; and the scene of King Lear coming on the stage holding dead Cordelia and always a whisper thunders in our hearts… "No cause, no cause, no cause, no cause, no cause…."

Every epic, after all, is created from a local row.

Suddenly the fragments of poetry, mythology, religion I'd picked up in my discursive and eclectic readings became rays of sunlight on broken columns. With these fragments I've shored the ruins of my life. My colleagues were lawyers, businessmen, doctors, accountants, principals, trade union leaders, academics and politicians all – and yet what everyone wanted to hear was a prayer or an episode from literature or from a religious text. During those five long nights no one discussed the constitution, or his bank account, or the value of his property or the price of his car.

We began to pray before every meal. First in Fijian, then in Hindi, and in Urdu and I would pray in English. The routine for the incarcerated Government of Fiji also included hymn singing, mainly in Fijian. Jo or Kalou would begin in Fijian; after that an MP would read something from the Bible; then Fida would recite a Muslim prayer; then Harish in Hindi, and finally I'd be asked to say my piece in English. Dr Bavadra began calling me Rev Dr Nandan. It must have made an impression on the soldiers: outside one or two would make a silent, shuffling noise with their feet, like soft rain falling on the salt-laden sea.

By Friday, I think, we were allowed a change of clothing. In the afternoon our distraught wives came as visitors one by one, tearful and all tragic-looking. Jyoti came

in a sari draped in sadness. We met in the presence of the soldiers and had to speak in English. But in between we whispered in Hindi. Rumours were rife: a special Queen's armada was being dispatched from Singapore… Australia and New Zealand were sending troops by midnight… *They'll come like midnight's children*, my literary mind clicked.

All this, of course, was nonsense but at the time we were all clutching at straws in the wind. Looking back now, the naiveté of our people, and our own, gives me intense pain. We were such ignorant, innocent people; we had so little understanding of *realpolitik.* We had never fought for independence; we had no experience of civil disobedience. Or of how the placid waters of the Pacific could brew the Colonel and throw up this devastating hurricane on our islands. We knew so little. History was unimportant to us. It hadn't even become a witness to our manacled destiny. We were Naipaul's mimic men. Ratu Reddy's history lessons had little to do with our fatal world with its false sense of security.

On Saturday afternoon, the tension mounted. Hundreds of people had gathered outside the gates of the PM's residence; the army had started to roll barbed wire to keep them away from the entrance. Dr Bavadra walked out into his garden to a thunderous applause as soon as the people saw him. I do not think Fiji will in a long time give such a spontaneous ovation to another politician. One or two of the Indian politicians also ventured forth into the garden; the people greeted them with genuine enthusiasm.

Half an hour later the soldiers came asking for Krishna Dutt and Kalou. We refused to hand them over. Someone remarked: this is the beginning, we'll be shot two by two. With some passion the Indian MPs began singing Gandhi's favourite *bhajan*: "Raghupati Raghau Raja Ram…." The bewildered soldiers slinked away when they found the song was unending.

That must have been the longest rendition ever of that short Hindu hymn; and probably it was never sung with greater feeling.

Two hours later the soldiers came back asking for Tupeni Baba and Harish Sharma, and later for James Shankar Singh and me. Again we steadfastly refused to let anyone go. All of us would go, or none. If the soldiers had insisted on using force that night we might well have had a tragedy or two. But they didn't.

We went to sleep hungry and deeply shaken. Later we were told that one Fijian MP had, in his sleep, attacked another in the corridors of the guest rooms: he had seen his colleague as a soldier coming to get him. Some of us resolved to keep a night-long watch on the gate, where there was a constant, frantic movement of vehicles and soldiers. There was something sinister in the air.

I have in my papers another fragment written on Sunday, 17 May, at eleven pm:

> *An inspiring day. In the morning around 5am we got the feeling the army was planning to do something brutal, so by 6 we were all dressed and sitting in the*

> *PM's* bure. *Dr Bavadra came, followed by Adi Kuini. As a few soldiers surrounded the bure we began praying and singing. We sang for almost two hours. Then a young captain came to Dr Bavadra and said he wanted to take all the Indian MPs to "another place." The PM refused and, indeed, asserted his authority as still the Prime Minister of the country. He told the captain to ask his soldiers to put their guns down and leave the premises. The young and courteous captain was so taken aback that he left. But only to return half an hour later with a large contingent of army men. They moved us into the centre of the PM's lounge and started grabbing the Indian MPs. First the Indian and Fijian MPs joined arms. Then we lay on the floor, and our Fijian colleagues lay on top of us. The Minister of Lands fell on me heavily. I winced thinking it may be less painful to be lifted by the soldiers! Finally, after much struggling, the soldiers lifted some, dragged others to the waiting jeeps. It was Sunday, and most people would be home. The roads would be deserted, the churches full. And there were no witnesses.*

I was lifted by a huge black Fijian and thrown onto the back seat of one of the Landrovers. Later I was told by the PM that the man was one of the drivers of the Health Ministry! I can still hear the PM's laughter; instantly I forgot the pain in my back.

After we had been unceremoniously dumped into the back of the jeeps, the gates were opened. There were no crowds on the other side. We were being driven again, our destination unknown, our destiny in the hands of soldiers with guns.

Thirty minutes driving brought us to Borron House, possibly the most beautiful imperial building in Suva, bestowed by its owner, a rich colonial, as a gift to Fiji's national heritage. One has the most magnificent view of the world from Borron House: blue hills on one side, cityscape on the other, green landscape at yet another angle and the blue Pacific's beauty against the shore lolling its islands in her lap.

As we alighted from the jeeps, a Fijian hand patted me on the back and a voice asked reassuringly: "You okay, Doc?" I sensed it was the same chap who had thrown me on the back seat.

With heavy hearts we moved into the spacious lounges of Borron House. We had been separated from our Fijian colleagues and our Prime Minister – a cunning move on the part of the coup plotters. Together, we were strong and resolute. Racially separated, we were weakened – psychologically if nothing else. And now the crowd that had gathered at the gates of the Prime Minister's residence would also be racial in its composition and gatherings.

To create a sense of belonging which goes beyond racial boundaries remains the main task of the people of Fiji. In Fiji we've always been called Indians: the 1970 Constitution defined us thus – more than half the population of the country. Yet there are countries – about twenty-five – which have changed their colonial names ("Fiji" is equally a colonial invention) so as to be able to accommodate all their people, giving

them a common name. Keeping "Fiji" as a name for our country and reserving "Fijians" exclusively for one ethnic group was a terrible psychological mistake. When the coups came the world saw Mahendra, Satendra, Bavadra and Baba as *Indian* Cabinet Ministers! The issues are always seen through racial glances: Fijians versus Indians? Racial division has been the bane of Fiji.

Had "Fiji" given its definition to all her citizens, who's to tell how differently "Fijians" and "Indians" would have behaved towards one another in the postcolonial period? A name that would have united both would have been a blessing indeed, given the colour of skin Indians have in common with the Fijians – even the shape and size of many of our noses. But maybe it is the shape of our hair that separates us? Men will always find reasons for being cruel to other men.

To be a Fiji Indian is to be aware of this complexity of our existence on our small island. It has taken us almost a hundred years to become integral to the Fiji landscape. We have acquired some conception of what it is to be an islander. It is not easy for a people whose ancestors lived on a subcontinent and whose way of life was shaped by great rivers and greater mountains to suddenly accept the nature of life on islands, surrounded by a vast ocean. But now, living on islands, we cannot forget that no man is an island.

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We had been sitting in Borron House for about ten minutes with mauled spirits and exhausted bodies when we saw the Speaker of the House, Mr Militoni Leweniqila, descending, not unlike Moses, with two bottles of whisky from an upstairs room.

His first words as he came towards us were: Order! Order!

Militoni kept us amused for almost two hours – his language colourful, his gestures expressive and his laughter reverberating in the halls of Borron House. I don't think a more strange array of guests were ever housed there before: one Fijian Speaker of Parliament, eighteen Indian MPs, including seven Cabinet Ministers, and a number of fully armed Royal Military Forces soldiers who had deposed Her Majesty's democratically elected government.

I suggested that we, the Indian MPs, go on a hunger strike to protest against our forced segregation. In an emotional moment everyone agreed. When Militoni heard this, he went upstairs for his lunch, saying he would come down in the evening for some yaqona; he might even bring back the bottles of whisky. His departure immediately brought a pall of gloom. No morally supportive civilians were seen outside and Borron House was slowly filling up with soldiers. It was a typically Fijian-Indian situation: the Fijians all armed, the Indians totally unarmed.

Hungry and demoralised by the scuffles of the morning and the uncertainty of what was in store for us – and for the PM and his Fijian colleagues – most of us decided to find places to sleep in the midday heat. A couple of the older MPs looked

particularly forlorn under the remorseless gaze of the soldiers. There were some blankets available, and a few lay down and covered themselves from head to toe.

After about an hour, we noticed one young MP's blanket moving up and down, down and up somewhere around where his mouth was. Nitya rushed to see if the man was having a fit. As he flung the blanket off the man and the sofa, the young MP on a hunger strike was discovered to be munching a juicy apple. Our laughter attracted the attention of half a dozen soldiers in the room, who couldn't fathom the reason for our mirth and went away giving us sullen and menacing looks.

That little incident started a major controversy. The question was: who, in his infinite wisdom, had suggested we go on a hunger strike? Accusing eyes looked daggers at me. There's nothing more fierce than a hungry politician; and here there were a score of them, mumbling and grumbling. Lunch lay on the small table near the kitchen and was finally removed. The sight of food disappearing upset a few of us, quite inconsolably. At teatime, as eyes were furtively glancing towards the dining room, Jai Ram in sheer disgust announced that the hour of the hunger strike was over. "Do what you like and eat what you want," he said to the MPs in a harsh, disgusted tone.

The hunger strike had been a weapon used by Mahatma Gandhi against the British with enormous success. Gandhi believed in remaking himself constantly; he inflicted upon his fragile body immense suffering. By doing this presumably he was forging a national consciousness; at the same time he was giving the imperial British a bad conscience. As a student I had been profoundly impressed by Patrick White's first novel, published in 1939, which began with an epigraph from Mahatma Gandhi. It read:

> *It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering, which is one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone… the purer the suffering, the greater is the progress.*

In Fiji we had already tried the hunger strike as a political weapon, when some student-teachers had adopted the technique against the Alliance Government. The students eventually won great concessions, their hunger strike sounded the death knell of the then Minister of Education. Teachers joined in a massive demonstration of solidarity, the trade-union movement was brought into the mainstream of politics and this heralded the birth of the Labour Party.

Sadly, *our* MPs' hunger strike survived only one meal. Fiji is a land full of food, and none of us had ever looked undernourished. Most politicians, businessmen, trade unionists, church leaders, city and town councillors, academics, civil servants, never thirst or hunger. It would be difficult to find in the Third World a Colonel or a Minister who doesn't look over-fed, regardless of whether his country is famine-

ridden or war-torn. Fiji is no exception. One MP in sheer disgust told me not to ever come up with such Gandhian ideas.

He was applauded by his colleagues. The tension was high; I kept my silence. But in fact I didn't accept his argument: after all, Gandhi developed his most crucial beliefs in South Africa, not India – and especially among the indentured *girmit* people and small merchants.

From the imposing prison of Borron House, two milestones caught my attention: one was Nukulau Island, shining in the sun, a few nautical miles from Suva Point; a spot where many of our *girmit* grandparents were quarantined before being allowed ashore – for fear, doubtless, of some dreaded disease or another from the subcontinent. The other, equally scenic spot, was a promontory called Nasilai Reef. This was where the *Syria* carrying indentured Indians to Fiji was wrecked, on Sunday, 11 May 1884, at 8.30pm. By the time rescue came in the alien waters, fifty-six indentured Indians and three Indian seamen had been swallowed by the waves.

I'd been to the wreck of *Syria* as a member of the *Girmit* Council; the idea was to bring back a few rusted relics of the ship to the *Girmit* Centre in Lautoka. Unfortunately, the cost involved was prohibitive. (Soon after the coup, the *Girmit* Centre, which had been opened by Mrs Indira Gandhi, was occupied by Fijian soldiers, boots and all.)

Looking at Nasilai reef from Borron House, memories flooded my eyes. Throughout our imprisonment, I was determined that the Colonel would not make me weep, no matter how brutal his designs. Again much of my resistance had come to me from reading about men and women who had gone to their deaths without flinching. That must be the tyrant's most terrible and terrifying indictment: not to be able to break the human spirit of a good man or a good woman.

But looking from Borron House towards Nasilai Reef and the wreck of the *Syria* did make me tearful. Once again the *girmit* grandchildren were shipwrecked; and once again they had been totally unprepared for what was treacherously hidden in the paradisiacal waters of the South Pacific, with no hope of any rescue taking place. By an irony of history, today, too, was a Sunday in May. We had conveniently forgotten that we lived in an alien sea.

Our grandfathers, coming from those ancient, moth-eaten villages of India, hadn't seen a sea-wave; they didn't know how to swim; that is why so many drowned. We in the present didn't even know how to fire a gun. One would have thought we'd have learnt to say, "Never again!" But my fear is that we'll again be duped by the sweet words of charlatans and political sophists.

Around 4pm on that Sunday, we began to see people gathering across a ravine on the slope of a hill by the road. Slowly the message was spreading that the Indian MPs were confined in Borron House. The soldiers were guarding the building closely. Some of us peeped outside to see if there were any escape routes. There probably were but there weren't any escapees. So we just spent some time waving from the windows to the people outside. Once they saw us they clapped and cheered – which prompted a

few soldiers to rush into the lounge and close the curtains. Suddenly things looked all the darker inside, while the sun, we knew, shone brilliantly outside.

Around 6pm, Militoni descended the stairs again, bathed, powdered, his graying hair awash with a rather pungent-smelling oil. His ebullient presence transformed the mood of the place: the barren house suddenly came to life as soldiers were dispatched with what, in Fijian, sounded like rude commands to fetch a *tanoa* and several pounds of kava from his house. A grog *tanoa* was produced, and kava made by two young soldiers. Militoni was offered the first bowl with great ceremony, and he accepted with great dignity, sitting on a chair in the centre of us all.

Then he began to narrate his story. On the day of the coup, as the other MPs were being rounded up by the "royal" soldiers, Militoni had somehow been allowed to slip past their guard, "unnoticed." (Doubtless his former political loyalties had something to do with this.) But he had not made a point of keeping a low profile and, a day or two afterwards, Militoni was taken from a club, where he had been in full swing, drinking and playing snooker. Before he was arrested he ordered two bottles of whisky and went home. Then he was driven – in a limousine! – to Borron House, while the rest of us were still restlessly interned in the Prime Minister's residence, heavily guarded. It seems the Colonel's men, after dumping him at Borron House, had forgotten all about him, and there he stayed until the morning of our enforced arrival.

At around 7pm Militoni opened the first bottle of whisky, and we learned of other, strangely amusing things. One of our MPs, Rishi Shanker, had not been in Parliament on the day of the coup: he had been in the Lautoka Supreme Court, attending to a case. As soon as the locals heard news of the coup, he was whisked away to a sugarcane field while a seat on a flight to New Zealand was being organised. Everything happened smoothly, apparently – except for a single incident when a freshly made basin of grog was placed for him in the canefield, only for a toad, from the midst of nowhere, to jump into it even before the first bowl could be served.

A bit, I suppose, like the Colonel in Parliament.

Another MP of ours was also not in Parliament at the time of the coup. This was Edmund March. Edmund March was a Chinese, a colourful character whose reputation travelled ahead of him. I'd first met him when he was vying for a position in the Senate. All I remember of that meeting is the way March kept pronouncing the coveted position "Sin-eater." He didn't get nominated.

On Saturday morning, I think, Edmund arrived at our house-prison. We were astonished and amused to see him. It seems that on the night of the coup Edmund had just gone to sleep, at his home. Next morning, however, the incongruity of the situation had dawned on him: why wasn't he being interned with the others? Apparently nobody had noticed his absence – and this is always disturbing for any politician. Edmund rang the army to tell them of his whereabouts, but no one came.

The following morning when he went to buy bread he saw the wife of a High Commissioner and told her he was Edmund March, the Coalition's only Chinese MP. She refused to believe him. By midday Edmund was really starting to fret and worry.

So he made his wife ring the army headquarters to inform the officer-in-charge that Honourable Mr March was still at loose and should be arrested forthwith. He was told to get dressed; the soldiers were on their way. But still no one came. He waited and waited, in his parliamentary suit, until early the following morning. Only then a couple of soldiers came and brought him to us….

And so we continued talking and joking, until Militoni declared, "Order! Order!" and a couple of quite bewildered soldiers came to attention. We all laughed – but not too loudly; one doesn't make fun of people carrying loaded guns. Besides, people with a sense of humour, generally, don't carry guns.

Around eight-thirty Militoni went upstairs for his special dinner, carrying his unopened bottle of whisky back with him. A politician and a bottle of whisky are seldom parted. Most of us had politely refused to share his drink, but two Senior Cabinet Ministers had partaken of the golden liquid.

That night we slept intermittently, with soldiers winding amidst MPs lying on the rugs and sofas. One night, around 2am, I suddenly awoke from behind the sofa where I lay. I saw two soldiers pointing their guns at K's noisy nostrils. The Minister of the deposed Government was snoring horrifically. For a moment, I feared the soldiers would shoot at any movement. But even in the dimmed light they didn't look particularly murderous. I woke up two other MPs. One of us asked the soldiers, calmly: "Yes, bro, what's the trouble?"

They pointed to K's oblivious nostrils and quietly marched out. K awoke and was advised to control his snores before we were all fatally shot. The next morning we asked the Deputy PM to talk to him. Soon after breakfast, the Deputy PM – a serious, sombre man by nature – approached K delicately. K was adamant that he never snored.

Monday morning a larger crowd had gathered on the slope, near a ravine. Slowly we drew the curtains and waved. Our wives were allowed to come and see us for ten minutes. Jyoti came with some clothes, a Bible and some leaflets from my daughter Kavita. I read these during the prayer before lunch. Militoni was most impressed by my knowledge of the Bible. Even he sat during the prayers with a fairly holy expression on his laughing Buddha face.

In a way all this – Rishi Shanker's escape to New Zealand, Edmund March's insistence on being arrested, K's snoring and we waiting for the warships – all this was quite touching. We were the innocents without any knowledge of coups or military strategies. And so many illusions were necessary to sustain us in our ignorance and utter helplessness.

The day passed slowly: I began to write more, sitting so often on the toilet seat of Borron House. On Tuesday morning a soldier caught me on the throne, writing. When I came out they searched my satchel and took away the sheet of scribbled foolscap. I felt the loss of my thoughts rather sharply. It is now difficult for me to recall the events and thoughts as they happened – I had been keeping an hour-by-hour report. From this distance of time and space, it's impossible to recall with clarity and

immediacy those moments of dark stifled laughter in the face of monstrously shining guns.

On Tuesday, around 8pm, the soldiers began to behave in a most agitated manner. More and more of them were being added to the Borron House contingent. They marched, whispered, jumped on and off the military jeeps. We guessed that something was afoot. Perhaps soon the word would come and we'd be released? There was an air of expectancy. Everyone packed whatever belongings they had and waited. But we had to be careful not to show too much excitement; the soldiers might take that as their defeat and start shooting. After all, one wag pointed out, they didn't know what would be in store for them once we politicians were free and in power again.

At around 10pm or so, the doors of the Borron House were suddenly flung open. One or two soldiers even saluted as we walked past them, carrying our paltry belongings. Outside the night was balmy and fragrant. Slowly we walked down the hill towards the gate. The first man who held me close to his chest was a huge Muslim who said, "We love you." He lifted me up and then gently put me down. I'd never seen the man before. Then I hugged my youngest brother; he had been sent to keep a vigil; he looked grey and forlorn. There was hardly any conversation. We only wanted to get out of sight of the soldiers; certainly out of the firing range.

We drove, car after car, towards the PM's official residence. A huge crowd had gathered on the road. Apparently everyone had heard that we were about to be released.

We stayed at the PM's residence for about an hour, shaking hands, hugging our well-wishers, giving interviews. One Kiwi journalist asked me if we would win the next election. "Yes," I declared.

I went to my brother's place. Friends, family. We sat and chatted, had a home-made meal and then four of us drove to Dr Bavadra's home in Laucala Beach estate. And there he was, sitting among his *mataqalis*, every inch a PM, talking amiably to all and sundry and occasionally being called to the telephone. Then we left to return to my brother's to sleep for the rest of the night. It had been a long day's journey, from a nightmare to a home.

And then to sleep in the arms of someone you love, someone who loved you.

Next day, around 11am, Jyoti and I drove to our rented flat at 10 Wairua Road.

As we opened the unlocked gate, our dog Snazzy came running, wagging her tail. Snazzy leapt upon me as she hadn't seen us for almost a week. Strangely, it was at that moment that I felt a deep pain in my heart. How could one explain to a dog a week-long national tragedy?

We went in. No one had burgled the place.

Our flat, without barred windows or doors, with very few possessions, always looked quite empty except for the books on the shelves. Now it wore a funereal look. Jyoti and I then and there decided to leave it as soon as we found another place.

I do not think I can ever go in that flat again without seeing a Colonel striding into the middle of our Parliament, surrounded by masked men with guns. And a Prime Minister being taken away and the mongrels in the dark suits giving a shameless nod.

Almost eighteen months later, I met the diplomat to whom we had entrusted the care of Snazzy when we left Fiji in December. He told me how Snazzy had died with a huge worm coiled round her heart. We had left some worm-destroying tablets with him, but it seems he never gave them to her.

Every dog, I suppose, has his death.

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Fiji has remained one bleeding, unhealing wound.

But this anguished distance has not lessened my obligations to those marooned at home. My once-happy country is now living a lie. This is the most awful thing that happens in a dictatorial regime, whether brutal or benign. If Fiji has not yet slipped into barbarism, it is not for want of trying on the part of some; it is simply that the ordinary people of Fiji have refused to be misled. Therein, of course, lies our hope; to keep the fires of our good faith burning. In the light of those fires some understanding, some reconciliation may flicker into visibility as injustices are made visible, audible.

There are, however, other fires. One can't be self-deluding after two coups. After the second coup, I saw mad men dancing on the edges of a sacrificial burning *lovo* near the statue of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, a most respected leader. They had obviously dug it for us? The Parliament was desecrated; the pit of fire had a halo of darkness around it. It was as horrible as if one were to see people butchering each other in the shadow of Mahatma Gandhi's statue.

I have spent my time in the shadows cast by those fires. There has been only one aim: to help achieve for the people of Fiji some dignity and democracy through peaceful means. The signs are that it will not be easy. Political and electoral apartheid is likely to become the Fijian way of life. In a sense, it is more terrible than the South African variety; we in Fiji have known freedom and living together.

It is true, perhaps, that a country never belongs to one unless one is prepared to die for it. But there are so many ways of dying. Death has many faces; imagine those thousands of men and women – the *girmityas* and their descendants – who have perished over the past one hundred and ten years and their graves and ashes are part of Fiji's soil and sea.

From such solitude of dying to another hundred years of life's servitude. And this, during the last decade of the twentieth century, with the quiet knowledge of the countries of the region – including those for whom freedom is a living thing.

It is not for me here to comment on this shameful acquiescence of our South Pacific friends in the whole sordid Fijian affair. There will be time to do that. But what happens today to a defenceless migrant people could happen tomorrow to a migrant country. The momentum of moral law is subterranean, protean; it works in mysterious

ways, despite considerations of political expediency, of economic rationalism, of strategic issues and of one's own self-advancement and self-glorification…. There *is* something called *dharma*. The wheel will turn. And the worm will squirm:

O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

Dr Timoci Bavadra is now dead: cut short by more than cancer. There are other brave and visionary men and women in Fiji. Their commitment continues amidst intimidation and selective torture learnt by many a thug in the deserts of the Middle East. But blood, we know, has only one colour. A poet friend once wrote: From deserts still the prophets come – one can say, From prophets the deserts also come.

My indentured grandfather used to tell me the old fable of the two mongrels and the Monkey: one day the hungry mongrels found a piece of *roti*. They were so greedy, they could not share it and began quarrelling. They went to the Monkey to ask for his judgment. The Monkey obliged with a pair of scales; the revealing symbol of justice. He divided the *roti* into two and weighed; naturally one side weighed a bit more – like 49 per cent, 51 per cent, so common a situation in Third World countries. The Monkey took a large bite of the heavier portion. The other side became heavier, and so he had to repeat his act. The mongrels sat staring, marvelling at the sense of fair play of the Monkey, until finally there was no *roti* left….

Today, we continue to play the colonial Monkey game, with every mongrel wanting to be a Monkey….

Written in May 1989