

In Search of 'The Children of the Wind.'
A Journey to Chattisgarh

Brij V. Lal

*We made no inquiries about India or about the families
 people had left behind.*

*When our ways of thinking changed, and we wished to
 know, it was too late.*

V. S. Naipaul

18 May 1901. Chiriya. Father's Name Kuru. Age 17. A Bhumihar from the village of Bandarchua in Lohardaga district of Bihar, boarded *Fazilka II SS* for Fiji. He was an indentured labourer, one of sixty thousand who went to Fiji between 1879 and 1916. He was recruited upcountry: precisely where and in what circumstances, is not known. But the rest of the details are clinical, precise and authoritative, brushed clean of the dusty, murky details of history. From his village, Chiriya was taken to Purulia Depot in late March and from there transported to Calcutta. A few days later, he appears before Fiji's Emigration Agent, AC Stewart, who certifies that 'the Man above described has appeared before me and has been engaged by me on behalf of the Government of Fiji and is willing to proceed to that country to work for hire; and that I have explained to him all matters concerning his engagement and duties.' This, Stewart says confidently, was also 'done at the time of registration by the Registering Officer appointed by the Indian Government.' All matters properly explained to an unlettered seventeen year old by an important Angrezisaheb with myriad other matters to attend to! On 4 May, the Depot Surgeon at Calcutta certifies that 'we have examined and passed the above-named Man as fit to emigrate; that he is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that he has been vaccinated since engaging to emigrate.' His superior officer, the Surgeon Superintendent, agrees. All the protocols and procedures of inspection and registration complete, the Protector of Emigrants on 18 May authorises his emigration: 'Permitted to proceed as in a fit

state of health to undertake the voyage to Fiji.' A month later, Chiriya arrives in Fiji. And, then, promptly he disappears from the record books for ever, his name erased from the pages of history.

I began my journey in search of Fiji girmitiyas well over thirty years ago, in 1977, as part of my doctoral dissertation on the origins of Fiji's north Indian migrants. During the course of my research, I read and coded each and every one of the 45,000 Emigration Passes and computer-analysed them. It was an unimaginably tedious, eyesight-destroying task, sitting by myself and reading reels upon reels of microfilm in the darkened basement of the Australian National Library in Canberra month after month. Each important piece of information in the Pass: caste of the migrant, his or her district of origin and district of registration, sex, next-of-kin, had to be coded and entered individually on a specially designed sheet of paper and analysed using the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* on the massive UNIVAC computer, now truly a relic of the past. It had to be done, each Pass considered individually. Perhaps in some subconscious sense I was paying homage to those who had crossed the 'kala pani,' the dark, dreaded seas to come to Fiji, to give us all a new beginning, and who were the foundational spring of our own lives. It was during that exercise, with bits and pieces of information supplied by my father about his indentured father's background in India, that I had discovered my paternal grandfather's Emigration Pass. Using information in it, I had visited his village in Bahraich district during my year-long fieldwork in India in 1978 and re-connected with my ancestral family, to my father's unbounded delight but to my very mixed emotions. Ganga water which I had brought back in a 'Teachers' whisky bottle remained one of his most prized possessions till his last days, kept in a green tin box underneath his bed amidst important family documents: holy water from the holiest of rivers from his father's land, drops of which were ritually poured on the lips of dead relatives to wish the departed soul well on its next journey.

Now, thirty years later, I am embarking on another journey of discovery. Chiriya was my Nana, my mother's father. I never knew him in the way I knew Aja, my paternal grandfather, who died a grand old man when I was ten; a picture of him remains vivid in my mind. But Chiriya Nana died very young, when my mother was just a little child. She had only the dimmest memory of him, unable even to recall what he looked like. My mother and her younger siblings, two sisters and a brother, were brought up in various parts of Labasa by some distant relations now gone and forgotten, in circumstances about which not a word was ever said but about which much was understood. Chiriya remained just a name to us,

nothing more. There are no photographs, no mementoes. My mental archive of Nana was blank.

Until about two decades ago. It all came about in an unexpected way. My reputation as the genealogist of the *giritiyas* spread far and wide with the publication of my first book, which presented the fruits of my doctoral research, *Giritiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (1983). Soon afterwards, I began receiving enquiries from people, at first few but then increasing rapidly in volume, about their ancestral connections to India and whether I could help them locate the Emigration Passes of their great-grandparents. Often the enquiry is futile because the information is vague and scanty. The name of the person is remembered and of the ship too, but there could be dozens of Gajadhars or Bisuns or Autars on the same ship. The name of the district of origin could make all the difference but the response often is, 'he came from somewhere around there,' meaning the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh (Basti, Faizabad, Gonda and the like). The need to know, to re-connect, is genuine and in its own way deeply moving. There is a certain poignancy to the desperate search for roots, but what is lost is now lost for ever.

These enquiries bring me back to Chiriya Nana and the need for me to 'do something' to fill the gap in that side of our family's history, if for nothing else than for my late mother. A child growing up without ever knowing her parents is a haunting thought. If I don't do it, no one else will. I have nothing to go on except conversations with old folk in the village and older members of our extended family, now all gone. Slowly, over the years, fragments of a picture emerge. Nana served his indenture as a train driver's helping hand in the Tuatua Sector. He most certainly was not a 'train driver,' as some people vaguely claimed. That was a white man's job. Aja had also served his indenture as a stable hand in the same sector which leads me to wonder if the two men knew each other: probably not. After his indenture ended, Aja settled in Tabia as a small time cultivator on leased land of rice, lentils, peanuts, maize and other such crops until sugar cane arrived in the 1930s.

Nana settled across the Laqere River in a place called NukNuk. The place is now covered in thick bush with no sign of previous human habitation at all. As children, we knew of NukNuk as Nana's place, but also as a place of bad memories, haunted, a place to be avoided by children. NukNuk is completely cut off from the village of Laqere. Why Nana settled in this remotest of places, away from all his fellow Indians, remains a mystery. Nana's heart was not in farming, it was said. He spent all his time fishing in the sea nearby, a loner at peace only with himself, a recluse. That was a puzzle because interdependence and cooperation were

the only way an Indian village functioned. People had to work together to plant, to harvest, to celebrate life and mourn its passing, but Nana seemed to relish living on the outer edges of society. He had some close family members living in the neighbouring settlements and that for him was enough.

After Nana's death sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s, the extended family fractured. Some went to Dreketi in southern Vanua Levu to work as copra cutters on Don Bull's coconut plantation. Others followed. From Dreketi they went to Savusavu to copra cutting jobs on the Vulagei Estate, and there they remained for the rest of their lives. Distant relatives are still scattered around the place. We had no contact with them at all. Savusavu might as well have been on a distant island somewhere far away in the Pacific. There were no roads linking Savusavu to Labasa, the local town, and a boat journey was hazardous and taken only in the rarest or most desperate of circumstances. Rumour had it that some younger members of the family had gone 'astray.' One of them was said to have married a Fijian or a Part-European, which was then simply unheard of in Tabia. But all that was distant news. Caught up in our own world, we forgot about our extended maternal family in other parts of the island.

In 2009, while researching at the National Archives in Fiji, I decided to look for Nana's Emigration Pass, but there was little to go by. All I had heard was that Nana had arrived 'a few years before' Aja did in 1908. Which ship, which district, which year: nothing was known. All I had was Nana's name. I began working back from the 1908 Emigration Passes of *Sangola II* to the Emigration Passes of *Ganges* which had come to Fiji in 1900, some twenty two ships earlier. Since the Passes are organized alphabetically, the search was not so arduous. I looked at all Man's Emigration Passes beginning with the letter 'C'. If there was more than one Chiriya among the thousands who arrived in Fiji between 1900 and 1908, my quest would be dashed, for I would then have no means of knowing which one was Nana. Lady Luck smiled upon me. For all those years, there was only one Chiriya: my Nana, all of five feet and four inches, a labourer, with the distinguishing feature on his body being a scar on the left forearm. And he was only a lad of seventeen when he enlisted for Fiji.

Armed with all this information about Nana, I knew I would one day attempt to visit his village just as three decades earlier I had gone to Bahraich to visit Aja's place. It was a journey I would have to make in memory of my mother. But precisely when, I was not sure. Once again, Provi-

dence intervened. Siddharth Kak, the founder of Surabhi Foundation in Mumbai, wanted to 'bring to life' the *Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, published in 2006 and of which I was the General Editor. That volume is, so far, the most comprehensive treatment of the growth of the Indian diaspora from pre-colonial to modern times. Siddharth rang to enlist my (readily given) support to make ten or so documentaries on Indian communities scattered around the globe, with the support of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. I was a little concerned about the Indian government's involvement, concerned that the series might be used as syrupy propaganda for the glorious achievements of the Indian diaspora, but Siddharth's reputation for integrity and probity is solid and reassuring. I would act as an historical consultant to the project, help make contacts, suggest themes and lines of enquiry but would otherwise remain uninvolved.

After a series of long telephone conversations over several weeks, Siddharth suggested that the last documentary should be about the diaspora's search for its roots in India, and that I should be one of the subjects of the story. The prospect is intriguing but in view of my heavy commitments in Canberra, I doubted if I would be visiting India anytime soon. Fortuitously, an invitation came from the University of Hyderabad to give the keynote address to a conference on the Indian diaspora there. I could accomplish two things at once. Siddharth sets filming arrangements in motion when I tell him this. Aditi Dave, the producer for this documentary, sends me a series of questions and suggestions she would like me to consider, and asks for Nana's Emigration Pass so that she can make the travel arrangements, liaise with local officials and decide on shooting locations.

Aditi contacts the Resident Commissioner of Lohardaga to enquire about the location of Bandarchua. At first, there is great confusion. There is a place by that name in Lohardaga's Samdega district, she is told, but there is also one in Jaspur district in Chattisgarh. Which one was it? Lohardaga and Jaspur are neighbouring districts now in two different provinces. A series of hectic emails ensue. Luckily, a piece of information in the Emigration Pass saves the day. Bandarchua on the Emigration Pass was in the tehsil (sub-district) of Khunkuri. There was only one tehsil by that name, and it was in Chattisgarh! We are all relieved.

The physical boundaries of this region had changed several times in recent decades. In pre-independent India, Bihar was a large sprawling province covering several linguistic and geographic areas. After independence, as state boundaries were drawn up, certain places had been shifted from one province to another. Parts of Sirgooja, for instance,

which was also known as Lohardaga, had been moved to Madhya Pradesh. In 2000, new language-based states were created. Among them was Jharkhand, the heartland of tribal India, with Ranchi as its capital and Lohardaga as one of its districts, and the other was Chattisgarh, with Raipur as its administrative centre. Bandarchua, I discovered, was one of ninety nine nondescript villages in the tehsil of Khunkuri.

From Hyderabad, I fly to Ranchi via Delhi, and meet up with the Surabhi documentary team: Aditi, Sudiksha Dhooria, Kaushik the camera man from Calcutta, camera attendant Shyamal, production person Rupesh and the driver, Binod. All of them look so young, none over mid-thirty. Their purposefulness and professionalism impress me. Their mind is fully on the work at hand and there is no time to waste. We drive around central Ranchi looking for batteries and other items, have lunch in a surprisingly pleasant air conditioned restaurant and then go to the Deputy Commissioner's office for consultation and direction. Kamal Kishore Soan, an IAS officer, is giving an audience to local leaders, both men and women, who have come to complain about matters of local importance, such as delays in the disbursement of allocated funds for rural projects. He despatches them with great speed and tactfulness while we wait and watch. The camera crew tells me to look attentively at the proceedings. Seriousness is writ large on my face as they go about their business. It is close to six o'clock and the day's proceedings have still not finished. Soan postpones our meeting till 8:30 in the evening at his official residence. Long days and very late dinners are a common fare in these parts, and in India generally, I quickly discover. At the residence, there is more shooting, more staged conversation, more helpful advice about who to see in Jaspur Nagar where we will be heading tomorrow morning. His obligation to us completed around nine o'clock; Soan rushes off to another engagement, a wedding reception.

We leave for Jaspur Nagar soon after dawn on a five-hour drive. Some mirthful scenes from earlier Indian journeys return. The roads are clogged with dangerously overloaded, gaudily painted trucks with 'Horn Please,' and 'Awaz Do' written prominently at their backs. One which splits my sides says, 'I am Horning, R U.' Incessant hooting and tooting when overtaking a vehicle or when alerting pedestrians or animals to the oncoming traffic is a constant feature of traveling on Indian roads. I am amazed at the nonchalance with which chickens and goats and cows cross the road -- as if they own the damned thing. Live and let live is the principle here. What would happen if you hit a chicken, I ask. '*Poorababadi*,' someone says, total loss. Not only will the driver have to pay for the dead chicken but its owner would demand the income foregone. If the

chicken had lived on for another five years, she would have produced so many scores of eggs and so many dozens of chooks and compensation would be demanded for these as well. Some owners would insist that even their roosters lay eggs, someone says to much mirth. 'This is India, *yaar. Sab chalta hai.*' Anything goes. What if you hit a goat? 'God help you,' Kaushik says, '*Double barbaadi*'. And what if you hit a person? 'Don't stop, for God's sake, drive fastest to the nearest police station, otherwise they will kill you and burn your vehicle.' It sounds a bit overly dramatic but I get the picture. I had been similarly advised about driving in the highlands of New Guinea some years back.

I had always imagined this part of India, its geographical heartland, to be tropical green full of forested hills and large rivers and animals about which we had read in our primary school texts: *Bhaloo* (Bear), *Sher* (Lion), *Hathi* (Elephant), *Bandar* (Monkey). Forested hills are in the far distance on both sides of the road though not verdant, but the plain areas have been cleared for agriculture. The rivers are low and virtually stagnant. It is the dry season and all you see are brown stalks of harvested rice in the hazy heat and swirling dust in the distance. Along the road in the shade of large mango trees people are idly standing around. I learn that there is no local employment in the hot season. Someone tells me that about sixty per cent of the population engaged in seasonal migration. It is history repeating itself. In the late 19th century, large numbers from this region were heading off to the Calcutta jute mills, Assam Tea Gardens, even to the Bombay textile mills, for employment. The districts which featured prominently in early colonial migration to Mauritius and the West Indies, in particular, were the Bihar districts of Arrah, Sahebgunj, Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Patna, Chapra, and Ghazipur (in eastern Uttar Pradesh). As supplies in these areas dried up, recruitment moved up north to eastern Uttar Pradesh districts of Basti, Azamgarh, Gorakhpur, Faizabad, Gonda, Bahraich and others. It is difficult to imagine now but a region that seems so desolate and diminished today was the site of massive migration a hundred years ago. People shake their heads in disbelief when I tell them this.

We stop at a chai shop on our way. The camera crew wants to shoot me talking to local people as if asking for directions to Bandarchua. I approach the owner, a dark man in old, tattered clothes. He shakes my hand and is eager to talk but balks when he sees the camera crew. Aditi tells him the purpose of our conversation. The man looks at me quizzically and invites me inside for a private conversation. *Apas ke baat*, he says. 'Are you from the government?' he asks. 'No,' I say. 'From the police?' 'No.' 'Will I get into trouble if I talk to you?' I am perplexed by the man's

anxiety, his furtive glances to see who might be watching. By now, crowd of onlookers has gathered. I come out and talk to them in my surprisingly fluent Hindi and explain the purpose of my visit to their part of the world. They listen attentively and nod their heads in appreciation but with absolutely no idea where Fiji was or if people from this region had gone overseas (or anywhere else for that matter). That was an unthinkable thought. The chai shop owner is clearly pleased at the crowd's reaction and tells me the direction in which I have to travel and the time it will take me to reach there. All this is really for the camera. We take several shoots because instead of looking at me, the man kept smiling and giving side glances at the camera!

After the shoot, we have tea. The man brings my cup himself, a mark of respect for a visitor. I dread this. Indian tea is not tea but milky syrup, and I am diabetic. I am acutely conscious of my erratic observance of dietary restrictions on this trip which would infuriate my family. The man looks at me with appreciation and anticipation. I close my eyes and take a tiny sip – nothing more than making contact with the cup with my lips. When the man turns towards the kitchen, I quickly dump the tea in a stagnant drain nearby. '*Theek tha?*' the man asks, was it okay? '*Bahut Badhiya,*' I say, very good! By this time, I was practised at telling small lies to keep my sanity and my health intact. And by this time, too, I also knew the routine of road travel in India. Toilet paper is an essential item to be carried in your personal luggage at all times. I can't squat in the privy and I haven't used water for toilet since I left my village in Labasa over forty years ago! We carry several bottles of water with us although I know that what is good for health is not necessarily good for road travel. A full bladder on a bumpy road is, well, not pleasant, to put it politely. I have difficulty 'taking a leak' in public, even in a secluded area. Where and how will I wash my hands? And 'doing the other business' in the open is simply impossible to imagine, with flies buzzing around and people looking in your direction. Indian public toilets are a dreadful mess to be avoided at all times. Better to have an empty stomach and an empty bladder, I decide.

I was perplexed by the chai man's initial reluctance to speak with me and wondered why as we resumed our journey. Kaushik fills me in with the details of something I had heard in Ranchi. The country through which we are traveling is Naxalite country. The Naxalite or Naksalvadi movement began in West Bengal in the late 1960s inspired by the doctrines of Mao Zedong. A loose coalition of complementary interests, its initial aim was the redistribution of land to the landless through armed struggle. Prominent among its early leaders and supporters were people

from the tribal heartlands of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, places such as Jharkhand and Chattisgarh. The movement attracted notoriety through beheadings of landlords and other acts of terror and violence. A few days before we arrive in Ranchi, newspapers carried reports of three beheadings of police informers, people taken from their homes in the middle of the night, interrogated, found guilty, killed, and their bodies returned to their families. Just like that: retribution and revenge are swift and brutal, which explained the chai man's hesitation to talk to me. Is this is a terrorist group, I ask. 'No,' I am told, 'here everyone is either a Naxal or a Naxal sympathiser, even government ministers.' As I see all the destitution and poverty around me, I can understand why. 'If I were living here, I would be a Naxal too,' someone pipes up from the back of the car.

Kaushik, the camera man, is hawk-eyed for shoot sites. We stop several times as he walks out briskly to survey the scene, the light, the shade. Then he sets up his camera and gives the thumbs-up for me to perform. I walk purposefully looking into the distance with a solemn expression on my face, and say my piece in clear, authoritative tones. There is little room for ambiguity and nuance in television talk. 'Keep it simple, Sir,' Aditi advises me. But one take is never enough. Something invariably goes wrong. There is someone in the background. I have used my hand to waive off an insect hovering about my face as I speak. There is the noise from a truck on the road. I look too tense for the part. Could I please re-do my bit one more time. One more time becomes several more times on virtually every shoot. The routine is draining. Gradually, I become aware of the cultural difference between me as a scholar and the crew as film makers. They have their scripts and their questions. They do not seem overly interested in what I say but rather in how I say it, how it will all look on film, the scenes people will remember. 'How will this all fit into the overall picture,' I ask Aditi. 'Don't worry, Sir,' she says, 'leave it to me.' I do; she is the expert. They are so solicitous, so respectful, so innocent-looking. They listen to me politely, shake their heads respectfully in the quintessential Indian way, but I know they will do exactly as they have decided.

Apart from some breezy banter, we don't talk much on the drive. There is not much to share. The documentary team is about half my age. Their taste in contemporary culture and music is alien to me. They sometimes talk about the antics of this hero or that heroine, about a particular scene from a famous recent movie, but I am lost. I resumed seeing Hindi movies after a lapse of two or three decades, but by then everything had changed, the characters, the concerns, the whole scene. At the Hyderabad conference, I had chaired a session on Bollywood and the Indian dias-

pora. Farhad Khoyratti, from the University of Mauritius, gave a fiercely learned paper titled 'Choosing Bollywood: A Phenomenological Reading of the Contemporary Indian Diasporic Adoption of the Bollywood Text with Focus on Mauritius,' and a highly animated but very knowledgeable Jorge Diego Sanchez from the University of Salamanca in Spain spoke on 'What's After *Bend it Like Beckham?*: Representations and challenges of the Women of the Indian Diaspora in British Cinema.' They spoke enthusiastically about such films as *Hum Aap ke Hain Kaun*, *Dulhaniya Le Jayenge Dil Wale*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* and many more with similar jaunty titles.

Sitting in the moderator's chair, I felt like a cultural Neanderthal. I knew nothing about contemporary Indian cinema which was the subject of such learned discourse at the conference and in scholarly gatherings generally. There was a whole new world out there about which I was completely innocent. How had this come to pass, I wondered. What about movies that moved my generation? *Pakeeza*, *Waqt*, *Guide*, *Sangam*, *Madhumati*, *Ganga Jamuna*. *Mother India* and the greatest of them all, *Pyasaa*? Shah Rukh Khan, I learn, is a major Bollywood star, but what about Dilip Kumar or even Rajesh Khanna? Kajol and Kareena Kapoor are the latest female heart throbs of the screen, but what about Waheeda Rehman and Zeenat *Dum Maro Dum* Aman of my youthful years, the stuff of our romantic dreams and fantasies? I feel stranded in a rapidly vanishing past, a remnant in my own lifetime. I keep my thoughts to myself. The sense of being lost and being irrelevant to the world around me has been with me for some time, and the distance between the past the present increases daily.

'What do you like about India, Sir,' Aditi asks me, trying to start a conversation after a long silence. 'Your cricket team,' I say with a chuckle. It was a cruel joke, I know, because the much vaunted Indian cricket team was a total wipe out in Australia, a cause for much national anguish. We laugh and compare notes about who should be in and who should be out of the Indian national team. But Aditi's question has touched something deep in me though I cannot quite put my finger on it. I still cannot answer that question. Many Indians of the colonial Indian diaspora carry in their heads a rather fossilised, idealised image of India as a land of great myths and legends, of heroic figures and great epics with which they grew up, especially the *Ramayana*. They would be in for a rude shock as they pass through modern airports as good as any in the world, as they travel along modern highways in Hyderabad and Bangalore, for instance, or shop in swanky outlets in most metropolitan centres. You do not have to go to London to shop at Marks and Spencer; these

prestigious names are now common in India. Craze for things ‘phoren,’ once so common and so irritatingly insistent, is now firmly a thing of the past.

I detect in most people with whom I speak a quiet sense of pride in being an Indian. They might want to visit other countries but India is where they would live. It is their home; they want no other. Aditi went to the United Kingdom to do a course in journalism and could easily have stayed on there, but she returned ‘to her own place,’ where her friends and family were. This experience is not uncommon. There is even a major Bollywood movie about it, *Swadesh*, if I recall correctly, about a man returning to his native land to apply his foreign-learned skills to improve the life of his people. I don’t see the country through rose-tinted glasses: the newspapers are full of reports about corruption and violence; communal tensions are real, and poverty still stalks large parts of the country. But there is a genuine, unyielding commitment to resolving the nation’s myriad problems through the values and practices of democracy. And that, when you think about it, is no mean achievement in the developing world. That would be one answer to Aditi’s difficult question.

For the first time in my life, I am travelling fully equipped with an iPhone and an iPad, much to the puzzled bewilderment of my family who know me at home as a complete technological innocent. ‘From 19th century straight to 22nd, eh,’ my brother Kamla quips. But these gadgets are a godsend on this journey. They enable me to switch off and retreat into my inner world. This I do by listening to the music of those long gone days of my childhood. There is Mukesh’s *Ye Mera Diwaanapan Hai*, sung on the screen by the inimitable Dilip Kumar in the film *Yahudi*. I realise quickly as I fiddle with my iPhone that other artists have also sung that song, and I spend hours comparing the various renditions. I similarly spend time with other favourites, such as *Aaj Jaane Ki Zid Na Karo*, famously put to music by the immortal Farida Khanum and with Talat Mehmood’s songs of love and loss (*Aye dil mujhe aisi jagha le chal*). Hindi music of a certain vintage has the capacity to touch the deepest places in my heart, to reduce me to tears with its haunting melodies. I don’t think Aditi or any of the other youngsters would understand this, but this is also an integral part of my Indian heritage which has formed me and without which I would be incomplete and all the poorer.

As dry paddy fields flash by, old memories of childhood return: the dry rice fields in which we played fierce games of soccer with balls made from rolled up paper, of the backbreaking work during the planting and harvesting seasons, of the grizzled old girmitiyas congregating at our home once in a while, smoking *suluka*, rough, handmade cigarettes

wrapped in pandanus leaves, or chewing tobacco, singing bhajans, devotional songs, and reminiscing about their past in a language none of us understood. What a journey they had undertaken: from this place in the middle of nowhere to sugar colonies thousands of miles away. What moved them? Why did they leave? I simply don’t know. As an exile myself now, I can quite imagine their anguish at not being able to return to the place of their birth even for a visit, dying in a land they never fully embraced. I think of my mother, betrothed at thirteen, married at sixteen, bearing eight children, all except one at home, the trauma and taunts she endured because she did not conceive during the first three years of her marriage, but ending her life as a respected member (*kaki, mami, mausi, phua*) of the entire extended family scattered all around Vanua Levu, a renowned singer of wedding songs and a fount of knowledge about the proper rituals to follow for the different *pujas*. Above all, I think about Nana, seventeen years old, no more, who took his fate in his hands, shouldered his small bundle of worldly possessions, and left for an unknown place called Fiji.

We arrive in Bandarchua mid-morning. We had decided to do two days of shooting here, but word had been received the previous evening that the Maoist Coordinating Committee (MCC) had declared a strike the following day. That would mean that all public roads would be blocked by the Naxalites. Everyone knew that vehicles which breached the road-blocks would be fair game, blown up by improvised roadside devices. But I have to be in Ranchi to catch the plane back to Australia the day after so shooting will have to be speeded up. As Kaushik sets up his camera, a crowd gathers around us. We are an item of great curiosity; film crew is rare in this part of the world. Word quickly gets around about the purpose of my visit and people are curious about who my family might be. I meet Mr Narayan Prasad Gupta, the Deputy Sarpanch (chair) of the village council and Mr Ram Kishore Saipaikra. When I explain why I am there, Mr Gupta asks for my ‘titol.’ He means my caste name. Lal does not help: it is not a caste name. I mention Nana’s caste, Bhumihar. That, too, is of no use. I am not disappointed. I had not come to Bandarchua with any expectation of finding Nana’s relatives here. After all, there had been no contact for well over a century. Merely to find the place he came from would be enough for me, more than enough.

I walk around. The land is flat and dry as far as the eye can see, dusty and shimmering in the heat. The village centre where we have stopped has several tattered shops selling soft drinks and cheap goods for the locals. Shop signs are painted in bright colours, in both English and Hindi. People are generally well dressed in shirts and long pants; the old

familiar garb of *dhoti* and *kurta* is not much in evidence: a sign of modest prosperity perhaps? There is a television in one of the shops, and a teenager, knowing that I am from Australia, tells me that Australia has just won the toss and will bat first in what will be the final Test. He knows many of the Australian players by name, and is full of praise for David Warner, Ricky Ponting and Michael Clarke. '*Phir se barbadi,*' bad luck again, I say light-heartedly. The boys laugh, knowing the barbed truth of my comment. Many people carry mobile phones, and music from the radio is everywhere. Bandarchua may be remote, but like the rest of India, it is not isolated. It is a part of VS Naipaul's 'A Million Mutinies Now,' the title of one of his books about contemporary India.

'What kind of ridiculous name is Bandarchua,' Monkey-Rat, I ask Mr Gupta, slightly puzzled. *Ye kaisa bakwaas naam hai?* 'It is not Bandarchua, it is BandarchuaN.' 'And that means?' 'In olden days,' Mr Gupta continues, '*kuan* (well) was called *chuan*. There was a chuan in the village where monkeys from the forest would come for a drink everyday. That is how the village got its name.' 'Does that chuan still exist?' I am curious. 'Oh, yes,' Mr Gupta says. 'It is very near my house.' We take the tarsealed road for a few kilometres from the town and veer off on to the dry paddy fields. A kilometre or so later, we come to the chuan. It is still there after hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, a small round hole, a meter in diameter, no more, full of greenish water with a few stray rice stems floating in it. I comment on its neglected state. It might just as well be another watery hole in the ground anywhere in India. Both Mr Gupta and Mr Saipaikra nod their heads in sadness. 'There is no consciousness of history among our people anymore,' Mr Gupta says. *Itihas se kutch parichay nahin.* 'It is all money, money, money.' 'It is the same everywhere,' I reply. *Sabhi jaghe aisa hi hai.*

I want to commemorate my visit to this historic place by planting a mango plant we have brought along with us, at Siddharth's suggestion. A colleague (anthropologist Chris Gregory) familiar with the region later tells me that the mango tree was the right choice. It is associated with fecundity, fertility and auspiciousness. Tales abound of barren women falling pregnant after eating a mango. Having planted the tree, Chris informs me, I will have to go back and arrange an *aamaabivah*, a special kind of ceremony related to the mango fruit, when the first fruits appear. I doubt if it will be anytime soon. Perhaps my children will complete the return journey for me, though I know in my heart of hearts that it is an idle thought: their interests and aspirations are different to mine. History, the search for ancestral roots so profoundly important to me emotionally, holds little interest for them. A spade materialises from a nearby home,

we dig a hole by the roadside adjacent to the chuan and plant the tree in Nana's memory.

Then we leave. Tears well up as I walk back to our waiting vehicle, my journey complete. I came in search of my Nana's place, and I have found it in this desolate landscape. I feel my (late middle) age, and the passage of time. Suddenly I become conscious that I am a Nana myself now, of a thirteen month old Jayan. He is our pride and joy, taking his first tentative steps into the world as we move inexorably towards our twilight years. We likely won't be around when he comes of age. I wonder about the world in which he will grow up, the influences which will shape his life, whether he will remember *his* Nana, show curiosity about the old man's history and heritage, his journeys and transformations. I will not be surprised if he thinks his Nana's odyssey beyond comprehension, a figment of someone's imagination: born on a farm to unlettered parents, growing up without electricity, piped water or paved roads, being taught in primary school in open thatched huts, reading at home by flickering kerosene wick lamp, passing strange external exams and managing mysteriously to escape the world of poverty and destitution to a life of learning in the West. My journey will appear as improbable to Jayan as my Nana's appears to me, and probably just as intrinsically fascinating.

Who precisely was Nana is still unresolved in my mind as we head back to Ranchi in the gathering darkness. Was he a Bhumihar, as his Emigration Pass says, member of a powerful landowning caste that rules the roost in these parts, people of high rank and powerful connections associated with violent attacks on Dalits and other lower caste communities for demanding better wages and other rights, people who are regularly targeted by the Naxalites? And why would the son of a Bhumihar migrate? Had Nana escaped from the village for some crime he had committed? Had a girl from another caste been impregnated, inviting swift and severe retribution? Was there a drought in the region which forced young men to seek new prospects beyond the village? Was he at odds with the law? I can only ask these questions; I have no answers. And in the absence of hard evidence, the possibility that Nana was a Bhumihar must remain open.

But another possibility was inadvertently suggested by Mr Gupta. He did not know any Bhumihars in the district; perhaps he was reluctant to identify them for fear of an attack, but there used to be a group known as Bhuinhars in the area, all now gone or absorbed into the settled agricultural community. And who were these people? These were the aboriginal settlers of the land, subsequently displaced by Aryan migrants, and

now scattered in small numbers throughout Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh but once concentrated in the Chota Nagpur plateau, the tribal heartland of India. There were different types of Bhuinhars, differentiated from each other by rank, rituals and tradition. Some were patronized by the rulers while others were shunted to the periphery. Some assimilated with the new migrants from the north in the 18th and 19th centuries while others lived at the edge of forests as hunters and gatherers or as shifting agriculturalists who regarded working for wages beneath them. Agriculture was not in their blood; they disdained the routine of settled life. Some went into gold panning in rivers and streams nearby, and moved on when prospects there dried up. There was something else about the Bhuinhars I read somewhere later that stuck in my mind: that they liked to live in isolation from the rest of the world, preferring the company of their own close kith and kin. Nothing mattered more to them than their independence and freedom of movement. *Pawan-bans* they sometimes called themselves, 'The Children of the Wind,' establishing indirect connections to Lord Hanuman, *Pawan-putra*, 'The Son of the Wind.'

All this would explain Nana's otherwise peculiar behaviour perfectly: why he preferred to fish rather than work on the land, why he settled in remote NukNuk, far from the civilized world of Tabia and Laqere. Perhaps as a young lad, he was out and about, looking for work, met a recruiter who promised him milk and honey in the 'tapus,' islands, perhaps not far away, fell into the recruiter's trap and left. As I poured over the ethnographic literature on the castes and tribes of central India in the late 19th century, I came across this description of the Bhuinhar by Colonel Dalton around the turn of the 20th century: 'A dark-brown, well-proportioned race, with black, straight hair, plentiful on the head, but scant on the face. Of middle height, figures well-knit and capable of enduring great fatigue, but light-framed like the Hindu rather than presenting the usual muscular development of the Hillman.' This will do me as a mental picture of Nana I never knew.

The past is now truly past. Whether Nana was a Bhumihar of the settled dominant agricultural community of Bihar, or a restless Bhuinhar wanderer of the forested hills of central India, matters little. His secrets, the fears and ambitions that drove him from this place to faraway Fiji, went with him. But I am glad I made the return journey for him, and especially for my mother. I desperately wish mother were alive to hear the news of my visit to her father's distant homeland. I would like to think that Nana would be pleased that his wanderlust and free spirit continue to flow in the veins of his grandchildren now scattered around the globe:

like him, 'The Children of the Wind.' I leave Bandarchuan with 'memories vague of half-forgotten things/ Not true nor false, but sweet to think upon.'

Author

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