

## Nandu's Shadow

Brij V. Lal

*I feel you die a little  
each time the phone rings unexpectedly  
tearing the flying sunlight  
and shadows of spring afternoons*  
Tessa Morris-Suzuki

'Ram Ram, *kaka*,' Kamal, my nephew, said in an early telephone conversation from Labasa. Early morning calls in Canberra usually bring unwelcome news. 'What's up, *beta*' I ask, with some trepidation. 'Nand Lal *dada* died this morning.' 'From?' 'Heart attack.' 'Where?' 'At home.' 'Funeral *kab*?' When? 'Thursday.' That is two days from now. My first instinct is to pick up the phone and book a flight to Fiji immediately. But then I quickly realize I can't go because I am banned from entering the country. It hurts deeply at moments like this, not being able to fulfil the instinctual urge to say the final farewell to family and loved ones in person. And Nandu, our older cousin, was an integral part of our lives growing up in Tabia. He was our last surviving link to our early beginnings as a community in Labasa. His passing marked the end of an era for us, and I want to be there in person to bear witness to the moment.

I want to call, but there is no telephone at home. Kamal had called from the Labasa Post Office. He had gone to town to place a Death Notice on Radio Fiji. The routine was familiar to me. Three close family members would be notified through the broadcast, and listeners urged to pass the sad news on to friends and extended family members. *Sun-ne wale kripeya iss khabar ko so-and-so tak pahuncha dein*. I can clearly visualise the scene unfolding in the village. People would start gathering at Nandu's house as soon as they received the news. A corrugated iron shed would be quickly erected, people would bring food as fire would not be lit in the house until after the cremation, and someone would be dispatched to arrange firewood for the cremation the following day. Trans-

port would be organized to take the body to the hospital mortuary. The police would be notified and the death certificate obtained before the cremation. For thirteen days, the traditional period of mourning, people would come every night to sing *bhajan*, devotional songs, and provide company and comfort to the bereaved family. Then, gradually, life would return to normal.

*A thousand fantasies begin to throng into my memory*: of people and places, remembrance of things past, long gone and forgotten but now jolted by this sad news. Nandu lived across the road from us. He was not an original Tabia resident like us. The family had moved to Waiqele fifteen or so miles away sometime in the late 1940s, but had retained its share of the family land in Tabia where they planted rice, made oil from coconuts on the farm, grew peanuts, bean and maize. Sugar cane came later. In the late 1950s, the family began to break up as the boys married and began to have families of their own. As the extended family disintegrated, the family land was parcelled out to the boys. Nandu got the Tabia portion as his share, and he moved there soon afterwards. Until then, he had been for us a remote relative from a distant place, an infrequent visitor. After the move, he became a part of our extended family. With time, we lost touch with the Waiqele mob.

Nandu was a constant presence at every family function: when distant relatives visited or when there was a puja or a Ramayan recital at home. He would be the go-to person for us at major events such as weddings and funerals, our *agua*, the orchestra conductor, our conduit to the outside world. Father was, of course, the head of the family, but he was a shy, reserved person, clueless about the machinations going on in the village. It was no wonder that people called him 'Sadhu,' Holy Man. Nandu, on the other hand, was a man-about-town, so to speak, with a finger in every village pie going. He knew which way the village wind would blow before almost everyone else. And we trusted him; we had no choice.

*Let us not burden our remembrance with a heaviness that's gone*. Every Christmas, Nandu would come home very early in the morning to slaughter the goat for the occasion. He was our family *kasai*, butcher, as none of us were either old enough or brave enough to kill the animal ourselves. We could manage chicken and ducks, messy though it all was: the frightened, uncomprehending eyes, the squirting blood and feathers flying about, the headless, lifeless body on the ground; but goats were another matter. Things had to be done in a certain way. Several pairs of hands were required to pin the animal tightly to the ground to prevent it from thrashing about as the knife sliced its throat, the muzzle had to be tied shut with a piece of rope or cloth to prevent the animal spewing undi-

gested grass, the streaming blood (for curried black pudding) had to be collected properly in a *tharia*, bowl, sprinkled with salt to hasten coagulation. The limp body of the dead animal then had to be strung to a branch strong enough to bear the weight, the skinning had to be done in a particular way to avoid damaging the skin which could later be used for making drums, *dholak*, and the cutting up done carefully to avoid penetrating the stomach causing the messy spill over of its contents. Nandu was a slaughterer of considerable experience. As compensation, he would invariably take the head and the stomach. Mother once remarked that instead of slicing the throat close to the head, Nandu was cutting it closer to the shoulder of the animal and so taking a larger portion. But there was nothing anyone could do about it.

Nandu was the most avid movie fan in the village. He would see every movie that came to the two Labasa theatres, the *Majestic* and the *Elite*: what improbable names in this most rustic of Fiji towns. Of all the people I have ever known, he had the most phenomenal memory for the plot, the dialogue, and the songs. He would give us a blow-by-blow account for hours, make comparisons with other films he had seen. He knew the names of all the actors and actresses (Nimmi, Nalini Jayant, Suraiya, Ashok Kumar, Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Pran), what they wore, what they looked like, who spoke the best lines. He would imitate the dialogue to our unbound delight. We hardly ever went to town, some nine miles away; cinema was simply beyond our reach. Nandu was our only link to that world of magic and fantasy. He was not only a movie buff, he was also a 'bush' movie historian. He would regale us with side-splitting tales of the old timers going to the movies for the first time when these began arriving in Labasa in the late 1930s. Once, some of them quickly opened their umbrellas in the theatre when they saw rain on the screen! One another occasion, they all got up with their palms folded in prayer when they saw the image of Lord Rama on the screen. It might have been the film *Ram Baan*, 'Ram's Arrow.' Some of them began ducking and weaving in their seats, swaying from one side to the other, to avoid the arrows flying on the screen. They took sides with the main characters, getting visibly agitated with the villains, shouting them down, interrupting the dialogue. These and similar stories would be later recounted by some unkind Viti Levu people to remind us, the people of Labasa, of our rustic beginnings and innocent social habits, to put us in our proper place – at the bottom of the social ladder.

*Jhankar*. Every Saturday, Nandu would cycle to town and buy a copy of the weekly published by Tara Press, Nasinu. Loose-leafed, these would contain the lyrics of our favourite film songs (*Nain mile nain hue bawre*,

*chain kahan mere sajan sawren*), which we would immediately commit to memory and hum for the rest of week, news about forthcoming releases and who was acting in them, publicity material on stars (*Kalakaar ki parichay*) information about how films were made (*Filme kaise banti hain*). We read about the role of camera men, sound engineers, mike men, make-up men, but with no precise idea of what or who they were. The weekly also had a question and answer session with the editor, Gyani Das, with such delicious enquiries as 'Which is a greater intoxicant, alcohol or love? We, of course, had no idea; we had experience of neither. 'Can a sightless man fall in love like the rest of us? Love was a matter of the heart, not sight, the readers were told. What do women cherish the most? Answer: once their unblemished character, now jewellery. Nandu kept most issues of the magazine. They are with me now, a priceless archive of vanished memories.

Besides *Jhankar*, he also bought Hindi newspapers. There were several with, as I now recognize, different ideological bent. *Shanti Dut* (Messenger of Peace) was timid. *Fiji Samachar* was progressive but politically neutral. Nandu always bought *Jagriti* (The New Dawn), with its distinctly and unapologetically pro-Indian bias, instilling in us pride in our culture and history, stiffening our spine, asking us to stand up for our rights against the CSR, for example, and against petty acts of racial discrimination practised by the colonial government. Being a colonial subject was nothing to be proud of. I now recognize in the journal the faint origins and character of my own political thinking. *Jagriti* was an integral part of the project of cultural rejuvenation in the Indian community. We would read the news aloud to our illiterate parents, and occasionally at village gatherings. Sometimes, discussions would go long into the night, especially if it touched the sugar industry, our lifeline. Radio came late to the village, sometime in the 1950s. By then, the shadow of indenture was receding and we were beginning to find our feet on the ground. Schools were being founded in most Indian settlements: Tabia Sanatan Dharam School was established in 1945, and Nandu was among its first pupils, present at creation, so to speak, and full of stories, real and imagined, about life in the pioneering days. I first went to Tabia Sanatan in 1959.

*A hunter of shadows, himself a shade*. Along with all his good deeds, Nandu was also an inventor of tall tales. Everyone in the village, especially children, was afraid of the dark. The night world, we believed, was full of unseen evil forces: *bhoot*, *pret*, *shaitan*, *churail*. We all believed in magic and witchcraft, *jadu tona*, and feared the worst if we incurred someone's wrath. Unnatural deaths were a particular cause of concern. If someone committed suicide or drowned, the soul would continue to linger

on in the world until its appropriate, predestined, time of departure, *Doom'd for a certain period to walk the night*. Nandu would tell us about someone always jumping off the Vunibacea bridge at midnight; we assumed it was Ram Lal's wife who had drowned in the river. He would talk about soft, wailing noises at a particular road junction, leaving no doubt in our minds that it was Pati Fua's son, Shiu, who had hanged himself from the branch of a mango tree in a gully over his wife's affair with a neighbour. He would tell us about seeing lights swaying in the distant hills at certain times of the night. And he would warn us to avoid taking a certain path after dark because it was the favourite gathering place for ghosts. Any noise in the dark, even if it was from a mongoose scurrying across fallen mango leaves, would induce scrotum-shrivelling fear in us. If we had to run some errand at night, we always did it in company, never alone. Nandu enjoyed our discomfort, he told us many years later. When my brothers and I reflect on those distant days, we realize how gullible, how innocent, we were.

*Kama Sutra Delights*. Nandu was a favourite of unmarried boys in the village who got their introduction to the business of bees and birds from him. It is blush-making even now to recall the detailed instructions and advice he gave within our earshot about positions and techniques and the wonderful pleasures possible in the bedroom, although we were too young to fully grasp everything he said. A few copies of well-thumbed Hindi books of sex and romance were known to be secretly circulating in the village. I suppose every village had its Nandu, who could talk about a subject taboo at home. The business of turning boys into men was always left to someone like Nandu. The practice persists to this day. Girls got their instructions and advice in sexual matters from some senior sister-in-law in the village who had similar licence. Nandu also fancied himself as a Lothario. Behind his back, we called him 'Andoo Bhaiya,' Randy Bull. We all heard muffled rumours about his 'fence jumping' with Dhannu's second wife, much younger than him from somewhere in Nasarawaqa. He always found some excuse to walk past our house to the cane farm where she often worked. People exchanged knowing glances about his movement, about what he was up to, or would soon be. There was much more going on in the cane fields besides hoeing and weeding. Several furrows were being ploughed at the same time. There were, in truth, quite a few Lotharios in the village as I found out later, as there still are: probably more now as kava-crazed men get weak on performances in other domains. The whispers of what went on in the village beneath the tranquil veil and under the cover of darkness never ceases to amaze me. That world was invisible to outsiders.

I left the village, first to go to high school in town and then to university in Suva. With each passing year, my distance with village folk increased. I was getting engrossed in a world of books and ideas beyond even the imaginative horizon of most family and friends. I was becoming a stranger among them. Whenever I returned, a party would be organized and Nandu would always be invited home, and sometimes invite himself. We would drink late into the night and play cards. Playing cards was the favourite pastime of most village folk when we were growing up (*Tanni, Raja Pakad, Seven Hands*). Even now, when I get-together with my brothers, we invariably play the card games of our childhood and laugh about the many cheating tactics we learnt from people like Nandu. Reunions were joyous occasions but there was not much conversation about what I was doing. Instead, during family get-togethers, I would often be regaled with some embarrassing incident from my past, such as wetting my pants on the first day of school, parents approaching our family with marriage proposals for me with several acres of freehold land as 'dowry', the girls, now women with children of their own, still enquiring about me and my whereabouts, or getting a 'hissy fit' with some old village woman who joked about wanting to marry me. Sitabia from across the river in Laqere was particularly mischievous. My older sisters-in-law even now recall her antics and my embarrassment. Nostalgia was all we had in common, but it could take us only so far. Later, my brothers also left for Suva for jobs or education though their connection with the village was less tenuous than mine.

With the departure of the boys, life at home began to change slowly. *Pitaji* (father) became increasingly dependent on Nandu. While the boys were still at home, they would read and interpret official documents for him, whether they were notices from the Native Land Trust Board about the renewal of lease or cane payment notices from the Fiji Sugar Corporation about how much money was deducted and for what purpose (cost of fertilizer, delivery services, cane inspection). Now, *Pitaji* had to turn to Nandu for help, who began demanding payment in cash or kind, usually the latter in the form of cigarettes, yaqona, a chicken or two if some writing or calculation was involved. 'Nothing free now,' he would say. *Pitaji* had the distinctive impression that Nandu resented intrusions on his time and was increasingly uneasy about it. It was very painful then but I can now understand Nandu's reaction. He saw us moving on to better jobs and careers, to newer worlds full of promise and opportunity, while he remained stuck in the village. Village life for us was limited detention; for him, it was going to be life imprisonment. He had his own young family to look after, daughters to marry in due course, and boys to send to sec-

ondary school. He resented assisting with the education of someone else's children.

The distancing showed itself in unexpected ways. Nandu was the president of the village Ramayan Mandali. As President, he decided the order of Ramayan recital, and we began to be allocated the most inconvenient times, close to school holidays or festive occasions. Nandu himself, an avid reader of the Ramayan, began missing sessions regularly as if he did not care anymore. More troubling was the allocation of the sequence of cane harvesting. Every year before harvesting began, the village cane committee would meet to decide the order of harvesting. Nandu was on that committee. Everyone tried to avoid the rainy season which set in around late October. The feeder roads would then become unserviceable, and the rivers and creeks would swell up which would make truck crossing difficult. Those farms located on slopes furthest from the main road and those which were in low lying areas and subject to flooding were harvested first. But old principles of allocation were being discarded for no apparent reason. Nandu began demanding 'something on the side' for a 'proper' decision. And he began demanding money for the odd green jackfruit on his farm that our family picked for food. It was the same with coconuts. It was not so much the money as it was the attitude that it expressed, a broad hint of an altered relationship that troubled Father.

*Pitaji* was too old to do the backbreaking work in the cane field. Arthritis had taken its toll; his back was giving in; and age was beginning to have its effect. We all decided that it would be best to ask Nandu to take over the farm on a sharecropping basis. He would keep half the proceeds after expenses and we would have the other fifty per cent. At first, it worked well, but over time things changed. Nandu began deducting expenses for small amounts of family labour hoeing and weeding, and began charging exorbitant amounts for fertilizers and weed killers which he bought from his friends rather than from the sugar company itself. Money was changing hands beneath the counter. Most visits to the town were charged to the cane account. All the expenses were carefully written down in a notebook, but *Pitaji* was illiterate and there was no way to verify them. It was Nandu's words against others. We all recognized that something was awry, but there was little we could do from overseas. We contemplated selling the farm and buying a small house near the town, but *Pitaji* was a village man through and through. He had his routine and his favourite animals. It was his place; that is where he belonged. 'In the town, I will just be waiting to die,' he would often say.

*With useless endeavour is Sisyphus rolling his stone up the mountain.* It was not a good time to be a farmer. The price of cane was down. 'Pocket change' is what most canegrowers got after the expenses were deducted. Even worse, many leases were not being renewed. At first we thought the Fijian landowners wanted their land back so that they themselves could enter cane cultivation. That happened in some places, surprising us with how good Fijians could be if they put their mind to farming. But, as usual, the picture was much more complicated. Many interests were at play. Someone was always ready to pounce on someone else's tragedy. We had heard that in Soi Soi and Laqere, some farmers had surreptitiously approached individual landowners with bribe (*ghoos*) to reserve the land adjacent to theirs to cultivate either for rent or on a sharecropping basis. Outsiders had no idea about this side of village life, but old certainties and assumptions about good neighbourly relations were disappearing rapidly. We were, once again, becoming a collection of individual families rather than a cohesive community with common purpose and common identity. The displaced farmer, if he was young and able, would then look for another place, usually in a remote part of the island to start all over again. More commonly, the farmers would leave cane farming altogether, migrate to Viti Levu and settle in the mushrooming squatter settlements near major towns and cities, or acquire a piece of abandoned Crown land on the outskirts of Nausori or some other town and grow vegetables for the local market. This would be the first stop in a long and unpredictable journey of displacement. Seeing people on the move reminded me of an earlier journey of desperation and displacement, the journey of our indentured forebears. History can cruelly repeat itself.

The idea of playing a similar game of bribery and betrayal also entered Nandu's head. His own piece of land was around five acres, and if our family land were added to his, the acreage would substantially increase, to fifteen. He would get our very productive rice farm in the bargain as well as the hilly part for grazing goats. His chance came when our lease was up for renewal and Father turned to Nandu for advice and assistance with the paperwork. Nandu thought of doing what others had done before him, approaching the landlord Sirsa, a chief in the Tabia koro. We, of course, had no idea who the landlord was. We were leasing our land through the Native Land Trust Board, which acted as the intermediary between the tenants and the landowners. This arrangement had its advantages. It avoided face-to-face confrontation. It reduced the possibility of corruption: once the rent was paid and the papers signed, the tenant would be left alone. But it also meant that both the tenants and the landlords were 'faceless' to each other, just names on a piece of paper. So when the

life of the lease was threatened, we could not approach the landlord for some consideration because we didn't know who he was.

Nandu approached Sirsa through the local shopkeeper Hari Prasad. Hari was not a local but a recent arrivee from Wailevu. I did not know him, but people talked about him as someone agile, a doer and deliverer. For a certain 'cut,' he could secure deals which no one else could. And he delivered for Nandu. Precisely how much money was involved is not known, but it would have been at least five thousand dollars, which Hari loaned for a substantial fifteen per cent interest. That, people said, was 'the going rate' in the village. Nandu told *Pitaji* that the landlord had decided not to renew the lease because he had some other, as yet unknown plans for it. The news devastated *Pitaji*. This was ancestral property. This was the first and the only thing his indentured father had owned in Fiji. This was the land on which he was born, where his children were born. This was the only world he knew.

*Water in one hand, fire in the other.* Nandu appeared solicitous, muttering soothing words about how this was the way things were going everywhere. Entire villages in Daku, Wainkoro, Lagalaga and Nagigi had been uprooted and returned to bush, the families wandering about the island or migrating to Viti Levu for good. He then broke the news that he had been asked to take over the land on a sharecropping basis for the landlord, which he had 'reluctantly' agreed to do. 'But what would happen to us?' *Pitaji* asked. 'Where would we go?' Nandu assured him that he would remain where he was for a small residential rent. That was the least he could do. As for income, well, we, his children, could all contribute which would easily see him through. 'Thank God, you don't have too many more years to go.' He was right about that. *Pitaji* died a few months later.

Hari Prasad, the shop owner, was watching and learning from the deals and betrayals going on all around him. He began to have bigger dreams himself. Selling goods on credit to the struggling cane farmers was small change, and Hari wanted to catch a bigger fish. There was no bigger fish in Tabia now than its biggest landlord, Sirsa. He was the man to cultivate. Hari opened the doors of his shop to him. 'Anything for you, *Bosso,*' he would say to Sirsa. 'Money is nothing among friends.' He could buy anything he wanted on credit, with no requirement for timely repayment: cartons of tinned mutton and fish, bags of flour and rice, dozens of cartons of sweet drinks. Hari arranged for the delivery of corrugated iron and wood for the construction of a new house for Sirsa. His children received gifts of fancy floral shirts and sandals and bales of cloth for *sulu*. Sirsa everyone knew was a big man; now he lived like one, and

he wanted the world to take note. *Hum hiyan ke raja baitho*, I am the king of this place. He even began dreaming about a political career for himself. Hari encouraged him on.

After a year or so, Sirsa's credit with Hari mounted to around twenty thousand dollars. It was time for Hari to make his move. He began to ask for repayment. But Sirsa had no money, and the banks would not lend him any either. This suited Hari perfectly for he did not really want money but had his eyes on Sirsa's land. He told Sirsa he would look after a man he counted among his closest friends and write off the debt in return for a sixty year lease on all his Tabia land for minimal rent. Sirsa was relieved. 'No problems, Bro. *E sab jamin ab tumar baitho. Koi parwah nahin.* All this land is now yours. The next day, Hari and Sirsa went to the law offices of Shiri Chand and had the verbal agreement transformed into a formal document with ample supply of whisky and beer at the Grand Eastern Hotel. Hari was now not only the village's sole shop keeper and its leading moneylender; he also became its largest 'landowner.' And he had big plans about developing cane and rice production as well. He also had plans to grow melon, cucumber, pumpkin, cabbage and other vegetables for the Nasea market. He was preparing for the future. He had heard that 'diversification' was the way to go.

Small tenants with poor production records would have to make way for more enterprising ones, and he had plenty to choose from. Nandu, he decided, was among those who would have to go. Where would he go, he asked Hari. 'But did you think about that when you took over Munnu's land?' Hari asked. Munnu was *Pitaji's* name. *Jaise karni, waise bharni*, you shall reap what you sow. Hari captured the standing crop to reclaim his loan. Nandu was literally left penniless. With nothing in Tabia to look forward to, he began to think about moving to Viti Levu. He knew some other distant relations who had relocated to the Nausori hinterland. Five acre parcels of Crown land, once earmarked for rice growing, in places like Waituri, were available for leasing. He might be able to persuade someone to lease a piece which he could work as a sharecropper until he could buy one himself. His son, Rudra, returned with the good news and preparation began to dismantle the lean-to house for shipment to Suva. The day before they were due to take the ferry from the Nabouwalu jetty, Nandu died of a sudden heart attack.

*No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones, No noble rite, nor formal ostentation.* The funeral was a paltry affair. About twenty people came, mostly elderly village folk. The younger ones had gone to work in the town, and extended family members from other parts of Labasa returned home the same day. In the past, they would have stayed around a

little longer to grieve with the family or to offer assistance if it was needed. The body had been brought home in a wooden coffin, not on the traditional homemade stretcher of split bamboo poles and coconut leaves covered with white cloth and carried in an open truck. It was all very much as I had expected, though I was told that the customary thirteen day mourning period was not observed. And immediate family members did not have their heads shaved as a sign of bereavement. These customs were on their way out all over Fiji, along with so many other ceremonies and rituals which had once been important to us but had now become irrelevant and burdensome, victims of rapidly modernizing times.

Nandu's death marks the end of a world of which I was once a part. He had through the years, seen the emergence of a new community from a bedraggled collection of men and women who settled in Tabia after their indentures had expired. They had cleared the land, created farms, established families, gave shape to a nascent community, and nourished its soul through education, cultural festivals and rituals. He had connected us, a generation later, to that past and revived in us, at least in me, an interest in its myriad dimensions. He had seen the village grow from nothing and then witness the old ties that bound the community slowly disintegrate from the corrosive effects of modernity beginning to push at the outer edges of the village. I was aware of Nandu's petty acts of duplicity and greed. He was no saint, but I don't have any bitterness towards him now. We all have our Nandus. We are a people like that, limited and pragmatic, adept at making 'a peaceful seepage into every opening left unclosed and a tenacious defence of every position once occupied,' as the anthropologist WEH Stanner put it more than half a century ago.

I wonder, as I think of that vanished world in a distant and wintry Canberra, whether anyone among those who gathered to mourn Nandu's death really knew who Nandu was, where he had come from, whether in that mourning for a man, they might also be mourning the end of a time that was gone for good, never to return. *So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.*