

Pratap Chand's *A Fijian Memoir: Footprints of a Girmitiya's Grandson*¹

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I am very pleased to have been asked to launch Pratap Chand's *A Fijian Memoir: Footprints of a Girmitiya's Grandson*. I am pleased for a number of reasons. I first saw the book in its embryonic form as a loose collection of chapters about a year ago and felt that it deserved publication, a wider audience. To that end, I made some minor suggestions for revision. It is gratifying that the project has come to fruition in this fine publication.

I am pleased as well because Pratap is an old friend. We go back more than thirty years, to the early 1970s when we were at the USP together, me as a rookie from Labasa and Pratap on an in-service scholarship. Since then, he has gone places: from being a primary school teacher to a prominent trade unionist, a politician, parliamentarian and finally a minister of the Crown – altogether a long and bountiful journey – while I have remained cooped up in the cloistered halls of the academy all my adult life. But despite his long and varied journey, Pratap has remained the person I knew all those years ago: humble, generous, unaffected by fame, and true to his roots.

And I am pleased at the invitation to launch the book because it tells a story that will resonate in the lives of so many Indo-Fijians of the post-war generation. In Pratap's journey, many of us will recognise the markers of own special moments, coded allusions to our own various dispersals, sounds of our own footsteps. In a very real sense, it is as much Pratap's story as it is ours.

The book can be read at two different levels at the very least. At its most basic and intrinsically fascinating level, it is the story of a personal journey: the story of a boy growing up in pre-modern times, without electricity or running water, reading by the flickering wick lamp in the silence of a thatched bure, finishing primary school and through sheer effort and

determination completing university education and making forays in to public life. In the course of telling his story, Pratap makes a vanished world come alive. He writes about the games children played in the village (gullidanda and suri and hopscotch: I don't know what suri is!), about the festivals that celebrated life and the rituals and ceremonies that mourned its passing, about the literal and metaphorical hold the Yaladro river had on children. Pratap tells us that Yaladro means fast flowing water.

The tragedy for the Indo-Fijian community is that the close-knit communal life that Pratap describes and celebrates – that was so typical of Indo-Fijian villages all around the country – has gone in many places as cane leases have not been renewed and as evicted tenants drift to the mushrooming squatter settlements fringing urban centres all around Fiji where now between 15 to 20 per cent of the total population lives. The book is in a very real sense Pratap's moving tribute to that vanishing world that so formed and deformed our lives but which is now on its way out.

Towards the end of the book is the deeply moving, even heart-rending, story of his beloved wife Bira's gradual decline and eventual death. The courage that Pratap showed in adversity, his love for and loyalty to his ailing wife, is reflected in unaffected prose, with poise and grace and touching sensitivity. In a very real sense, it was the experience of seeing the decline of a loved one that spurred Pratap to embark on his writing journey.

So, at one level this is a personal journey; but it is also more than that. Pratap uses his personal experience to reflect the broader forces and influences of history and the processes of social change of which he has been a part, of which he is a product. This is not done self-consciously or artificially. I am, as some of you may know, a historian by training and temperament, and I read texts through the prism of my discipline. I want to suggest that what is said here touches upon some of the key events and developments of our history. Let me mention a few.

Pratap's grandfather was a girmitiya, and girmit is, of course, the foundational cornerstone of our history. We were in Fiji because of it. Much has been written about girmit, and rather more assumed about it. I have been at pains for a long time to point out that girmit in Fiji was not like girmit elsewhere. It is too simplistic to describe it as a system of slavery. Girmit in Fiji was not a life sentence that it was in some other places but a limited detention of five or perhaps ten years at most. And when it was over, people moved out of the sugar estates and started life afresh, building a community from the fragments of a remembered past.

¹ This address was delivered at the launch of Pratap Chand's memoir in Canberra.

Pratap's grandfather was one of them. What is interesting about giriti is that it was a great leveller of hierarchy, fragmenting the arcane values and mindset of the old world and forging the beginnings of a new one that was more egalitarian and pragmatic, not encrusted with the ways of ancient village India. It is that world that the pioneers of Yaladro and other places forged; and it is the world we inherited, but which will not be able to bequeath to the coming generations.

Another great leveller of hierarchy was education, and it is something that Pratap writes about with intimate familiarity, from the inside as a student, teacher and administrator. From very early on, our forebears understood that education was the only way out of the world of poverty and deprivation in the long, lingering shadow of indenture. As Pratap demonstrates here, our parents began with nothing except with a strong determination to bequeath to their children a better world than they themselves had inherited. It is a wonderful chapter in our history.

I was intrigued that Pratap read in Yaladro the same books we had read in Tabia in the late 1950s and early 1960s. After all these years, I still have those texts with me as permanent reminders of my long and unpredictable journey. I have in my hand here Book One of the *Caribbean Readers*, with its unforgettable cast of characters: Miss Tibbs the cat, Mrs Cuddy the cow, Mr Grumps the goat, Master Willy the Pig, Percy the chick, Miss Peg the donkey, all jostling cacophonously for the attention of the farm owner, Mr Joe. And here I have the very first Hindi book we read in primary school: *Hindi ki Pehali Pothi*. Pratap refers in passing to something Mr Shiu Charan told him which I found rather puzzling. He told Pratap that the *Pothi* had mentioned and thereby encouraged *ladh jhagad* which he thought was the reason why there was so much *katch-katch* among our people. In other words, it was an exhortation to fight. But did it? I looked up the words in my *Pothi*. It did nothing of the sort! There was a pictorial representation of what fighting looked like, and at that stage, in class one, we were learning the Hindi alphabets by looking at pictures! Pratap says that including the words *sadak par paltan* was decidedly inappropriate. He says that the words were 'very prophetic.' Fiji saw soldiers on the streets in Fiji in 1987, 2000 and 2006! The words had nothing to do with the recent events in Fiji. The book was written during World War II when thousands of Allied soldiers were stationed in Fiji, whom school children saw every day. And the picture here is about the Victory Parade in Suva, in front of the present Suva City Library. But I digress. Pratap is absolutely right to emphasise the centrality of education in our lives.

Pratap writes at length about university education, and rightly so.

Historians talk about turning points in history. In the history of Fiji, the founding of the University of the South Pacific in 1968 would have to be one such turning point. Before then, as some of you would know, university education was restricted to a few boys and girls who were able to go overseas on government scholarships. It was a very select affair. But the opening of the USP changed all that., making tertiary education available to children from poor homes who could not afford to go abroad. That was how I was able to go to university; that is how Pratap did. The USP was the central catalyst for the emergence of the Fijian middle class of which both of us are a part.

And this leads me to make another point that Pratap makes obliquely, and that is about the fundamental demographic change that has taken place in Fiji during our lifetime. When Pratap and I were at university, Indo-Fijians were around 50 per cent of the population. They were the outright majority of the population, with all the fears and phobias about 'Indian domination' that that generated, hobbling political change. We were trapped in racial compartments not of our making. But now their numbers have declined to around 32 per cent, and going further down, while the iTaukei are around 60 per cent of the population. I predict that a time will come when people will find it difficult to believe that we were once a majority in Fiji. Our centre of gravity has shifted. The best and the brightest have left; those still in Fiji would leave if they could. Now Sydney/Melbourne/Brisbane/Auckland/Wellington/Vancouver are the new beacon for our people. When you think about it for a moment, you will realize that we are living through a period of massive change and transformation.

Which, for me, makes Pratap's book all the more important. It is an invaluable archive of memories of a world rapidly disappearing before our eyes. Pratap hopes that his memoir will inspire others to pen their own. It is a hope that I fully share. For, in the end, if we don't write about ourselves, who we are, where we have come from, our hopes and aspirations and fears –if we don't write –who will?

Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted now to launch Pratap Chand's book *A Fijian Memoir: Footprints of a Giritiya's Grandson*.

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