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# *The Road to Mr Tulsi's Store*

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Things past belong to memory alone  
Things future are the property of hope.

For a child growing up in postwar Fiji, an ambition to become a scholar or writer of any kind was certain to invite ridicule, derision, sarcasm, pity, disbelief, enough to be told to have your head examined. Everything — culture, history, politics, a raw, uncertain life on the outer fringes of poverty — everything pointed to the utter futility of pursuing that pointless ambition. Colonial Fiji had no place for thinkers and writers and dreamers. The country needed useful, pliant cogs for the colonial bureaucratic wheel, not half-baked babus who might ask tricky questions and create mischief. We were also taught from an early age that the humanities were for no-hopers. Bright children did law, medicine, pharmacy, accountancy and the hard sciences. That was the path to wealth and status and powerful connections, professions which brought fame

and fortune to families, secured good marriages. And yet, despite that brutal perception, many of us managed to break out and do the unthinkable.

The ambition to be somebody other than a poor farmer's son, inheriting his father's world of debt and degradation in the large looming shadow of indenture came to us early. Like most Indo-Fijians of the time, we were struggling cane growers making a measly living on ten acre plots of leased land. The ten-acre plot was the handiwork of the CSR Company which dominated our life for nearly a century. The Company was the reason why we were in Fiji in the first place. With careful husbandry, the limited acreage could be big enough to make the farm economically viable, but certainly not big enough to make us too big for our boots. The CSR was no fool. We were encouraged to seek alternatives, to get some education and to look for a career. If we were lucky enough, we could end up as a junior bank clerk, a subaltern in the civil service, as a primary school teacher. Anything else was beyond our collective imaginative horizon.

We were lucky. The timing was right. By the late 1960s, Fiji was on its way to independence which came in 1970, the year I finished my high school. The new nation needed teachers, public servants, economists, accountants. Employment prospects looked promising. We were fortunate, too, that the University of the South Pacific opened in 1968, giving us an opportunity for higher education denied the earlier generations of whom only a few — perhaps ten or so a year, the cream of the crop — were sent overseas on government scholarships. The rest disappeared into the lower bowels of the burgeoning bureaucracy, to remain there obscure and hidden for the rest of their lives. The opening of the local university in Suva must constitute one of the turning points in modern Pacific Islands history.

The university was for me an enormously enlarging experience. We encountered new and strange people from other parts of the Pacific, at first an unnerving experience for a boy from a traditional Indo-Fijian family from an isolated rural community. We thought more about the world around us. We glimpsed the uncharted contours of our own local history. For the first time in our studies, we came across names of local people and places and events in printed text, which made everything real, authentic, and so enthralling. As I read more and matured, I realised that this is the life I wanted for myself, a life of reading and writing, causing consternation among some relatives and village people who somehow thought it strange for grown up men to spend all their time with their heads buried in books, engaged in 'waste time' activity. I was determined to become an academic, and an academic I have been all my life.

History was, and remains, my discipline. The emphasis at school and university was on acquiring information, not on learning how history was actually done. That basic knowledge, so necessary, was acquired late, privately, haphazardly. And gaps remain. History, we were taught, was contained in written documents. Facts spoke for themselves. A heavily footnoted text, closely argued, close to the facts, was the ideal we aspired for. Oral evidence could be used to spice the story, but it had to be chutney, not the main dish. It is not the kind of history I read or write now. I am comfortable with the notion that knowledge is tentative and partial, in both senses of the term. And I accept that those binary oppositions, which once seemed so sacrosanct, taken as given, are porous and problematic. I still profess my discipline, but I find writing about unwritten pasts creatively and imaginatively more intellectually challenging and emotionally rewarding.

It is not easy. Whatever their particular idiosyncrasies and predilections, historians have their basic rules of engagement. We may embroider, speculate, and generalize, but we should never invent. That is a cardinal sin. Our imagination is disciplined. We work with what has already existed. How we shape that into an argument, a thesis, a narrative, will depend on the values, assumptions and understandings we bring to bear on our work. The process of reasoning and argumentation must be transparent and referenced. But conventional historical approaches fail when dealing with unwritten pasts where memory is not properly archived and written documents do not exist.

The idea of writing history creatively came to me when I spent a year in India in the late 1970s gathering material for my doctoral dissertation on the background of Fiji's indentured migrants. For nearly six months, I lived in the rural, impoverished region in northeast India from which most of the indentured labourers, including my grandfather had come. I soon discovered that for me, India was not just another site for fieldwork, not just another country. It was the land of my forebears. We grew up in Fiji with its myths and legends, its popular sacred texts, with sweet, syrupy Hindi songs and films. Our thatched, bamboo-walled huts were plastered with pictures of film stars and various multi-coloured gods and goddesses. In short, India was an important cultural reference point for us. But I also discovered, while in India, how un-Indian I was in my values and outlook, how much I valued my own individuality and freedom, how Fijian I actually was. The Indian obsession with your 'good name' and status, the routine acceptance of ritually-sanctioned hierarchy, the addiction to horoscope, was beyond my comprehension. Out of that intense, emotionally wrenching experience came my first

effort at quasi-creative writing as I sought to understand the confluence of forces which had formed and deformed me.

Encouraged, I began re-visiting in my spare time my unwritten village past. I began keeping a record of my conversation with people in the village, notes on things that seemed strange and curious. To give a concrete example. As a child, I was always intrigued by the presence of certain plants and other items at the prayer mound on auspicious occasions. Why bamboos, banana stems, rice and coconut? The village priest answered my queries squarely. Bamboo bends; it never breaks. So it was hoped would the family line. A banana plant is strong, prolific, difficult to kill off. Rice symbolises fertility. And coconut milk-water is offered to the gods because it is pure, uncontaminated by human hands. Why do we fast on certain days and not others? Why do Hindus worship the Tulsi plant? Why do we apply ash to our foreheads after prayer? Why did the pandit blow the conch a certain number of times while doing puja? Questions like that. An archive of anecdotes and information was slowly building up.

'Mr Tulsi's Store: A Fijian Journey' is the result of that private investigation over many years. My main aim was not factual accuracy in the conventional sense of footnoted facts to support a conclusion. Rather, it was to discover the inner truths of a community's life, its fears, hopes and aspirations, its rituals and ceremonies that gave it purpose and cohesion, the way it celebrated life and mourned its passing, the way it educated its young and taught them about their place in the world. In such an exercise, the historian's traditional concern for truth and understanding must mingle in some way with the approach of an imaginative writer to create a work of art. Non-fiction and fiction fuse to produce what I call 'faction,'

that is, lived, factual experience rendered through a quasi-fictional approach. In this endeavour, the writer gives his solemn word to tell the truth as he sees it. He is on oath. The rules of engagement here are more flexible; there is space for imaginative reconstruction and rumination. But all within limits. The material is given to the writer, and preserving its essential truth (as opposed to its factual accuracy) is his primary concern. His 'characters' are not the inventions of the writer's imagination; they represent real people whom he has seen and observed or whose stories he has been told. The stories have their own inner logic and destination beyond the control of the writer; he is merely the vehicle for their expression. The narrative is not 'sexed up' for literary effect in the way it is in works of fiction. Its singular purpose is to tell the story as truthfully as possible, without hype or hyperbole.

The book is largely a conversation about the Indo-Fijian village life of my childhood. Tabia is an Indo-Fijian settlement like most others in the sugar cane belts of Fiji. It was where I was born, but now it is a labyrinth of evanescent memories. I would not have considered it in any serious way but for two things. The first was the effect of the coups in 1987 of which the Indo-Fijians were the main target. I had written generally about the coups as an involved, scholarly observer, but an opportunity to serve on a commission to recommend a new constitution for Fiji brought me close to the coalface of raw life they lived on the raw fringes, on the sufferance of others. The world which was once intimately familiar to me was vanishing. As the leases expired and Fijian landowners took their land back, people were leaving, uprooted and unwanted, to look for alternative employment. And modernity had touched life in numerous ways. There was greater contact

with the larger world through radio, newspapers and television. People had migrated. The self-contained, struggling, isolated village of my childhood was gone. I wanted to record its old ways before it was too late.

I wanted to do that partly for its own sake. But there was another motivation as well. Since the coups of 1987, more than 120,000 Fiji citizens, mostly Indo-Fijians have migrated, with about 40 percent of them coming to Australia. A new migrant, or shall I say transmigrant, community is forming. Children are growing up uncertain of their cultural identity, unsure of their way in the world. They are from Fiji but they are not Fijian; they look Indian but they are not Indian. My own children are no exception. Confused about who they are themselves, they are disbelieving of my own background. The world that formed me is alien to them. They find it hard to believe that I was born in a thatched hut on my father's farm, delivered by an illiterate Indo-Fijian midwife, that I grew up without electricity, running water or paved roads, that our generation's motto, a painful reminder of our unpredictable and uncertain condition was 'one step at a time.' They think their old man is hallucinating. 'Mr Tulsi's Store' is my attempt to connect today's disconnected and dispersed generation of Indo-Fijians with their historical and cultural roots.

And what a story there is to tell. Here was a community, struggling to escape the shadow of servitude, cut off from its cultural roots and cooped up in a hostile environment, making do with what it could, starting all over again, all on its own. And yet managing in time to build up a cohesive and coherent community. Within a generation, a people who had begun with nothing, had achieved so much. How did that happen? What was their inner world like? What kept the community

together? How did people cope with sorrow and grief? What brought joy to the community? How were disputes settled? How did people comprehend the forces of change which lapped the boundaries of the village? Things like that. A whole unwritten world waiting for exploration.

We were from the village, but immensely knowledgeable about the wider world, probably more than most children today. That was a legacy of our colonial education. In geography classes, children had lessons on Burma, Central China, Malaya, Singapore, Manchuria, East Anglia, the Midland Valley of Scotland, about Brittany, Denmark and the Mediterranean coastlands of France, about California, the Canadian maritime provinces, the corn belt of the United States, Florida and the St. Lawrence Valley, about the Snowy River Scheme, irrigation farming in Renmark, South Australia, the transport problems of the Cook Islands — they had transport problems there? — the relief maps and the sheep industry in New Zealand and Australia. I did not do well in geography because, among other things, I did not know the name of the highest mountain in Australia. It knew it began with a 'K', but wasn't sure whether it was Kosciusko or Kilimanjaro! Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie confused me. And try as I might, I just could not spell Murrumbidgee. What kind of name was that?

In history in the lower grades, we studied the rise of the Liberal Party in New Zealand, the importance of the refrigeration industry to New Zealand Agriculture, the Wakefield scheme, the Maori Wars, about John Macarthur, the merino sheep and squatters, the effects of the Victorian gold rushes and the rapidly expanding wool industry, topics like that. In higher grades, we left the antipodes to focus on the

grand themes of modern history. So we studied the unification of Germany and Italy, the Crimean crisis and the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution, the rise of Adolph Hitler and Mussolini, the emergence of the trade union movement in the United Kingdom and, briefly, the rise of new nations in Asia. Pupils ahead of us by a few years had studied the causes of the 1929 Depression, the Partition of Africa, the social reform policies of Gladstone and Disraeli, the significance of the 'Import Duties Act of 1931,' the Gold Standard, the Abdication crisis, the Irish Free State. Important and highly relevant topics like that. I am not sure we understood all that we read. But that was not the point. The history books opened up a window to a past — even if that past was remote to all of us — that connected us to a wider world and to other human experiences in history. The process of learning, I suppose, was more important than the content. The hunger to know more about the world has remained with me.

In our English classes at secondary school, we studied both literature and language. I did not take much to grammar, could not get passionate about infinite and intransitive verbs or about predicates and prepositions. The knowledge was necessary, I suppose, but very dry. Literature, though, was something else, good, solid, untrendy stuff, that would be dismissed today as hugely Eurocentric and elitist: novels, short stories, poems and plays by John Steinbeck (*The Pearl*), William Golding (*Lord of the Flies*), Emily Bronte (*Wuthering Heights*), Joseph Conrad (*Lord Jim*), William Wordsworth (*Daffodils*), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (*Ancient Mariner*), Edgar Allan Poe (*Raven*), DH Lawrence (*The Snake*), William Shakespeare (*Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice*), TS Eliot (*Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Wasteland*). The list could go on endlessly.

Reading, broadening our imaginative horizon, was fun, but writing short composition pieces could be tricky. Try as we might, we found it hard to write a long meaningful paragraph on modern art, the astronauts, western films, the bottle drive or collecting for Corso, about the main stand at a flower show, the case for or against television in the home (we had no idea what this creature was), a climbing adventure, baby sitting or, of all things, a winter morning. In hot, humid Tabia! A few years ago, an old timer from Fiji living in Brisbane told me that in Senior Cambridge English exam, he was asked to write an essay on the 'Phenomenon of the Beatles.' Not paying heed to the spelling of the word and completely unaware of the existence of the musical group, he proceeded to write a long and meaningful essay on rhinoceros beetles which had recently ravaged Fiji's coconut industry! Coming from that kind of background, it was a miracle that we passed our external exams, and with good marks, too.

The metaphors of our own culture and allusions to our own past had no place in higher colonial learning, although in primary school we learnt Hindi and read about our ancestral culture and history, about various gods and goddesses and the heroes of Indian history. We had enough of the language to read the *Ramayana* and Hindi newspapers to our unlettered parents. The Hindi films, the Hindi music, the religious texts, the ceremonies and rituals we performed with mundane regularity, kept us intact as a community, connected us to our cultural roots, our inner selves. Thankfully, Hindi has remained with me as a hobby. I read and write it whenever I can.

But there was no Hindi in secondary school and beyond. I regret that now, but it did not seem to matter then. We were taught to learn and not question the value of colonial

education. Still, for all their cultural biases, the western texts opened up new worlds for us, levelled hierarchies based on economic wealth and social status, and connected us to other worlds and other pasts. They awakened our imagination, emphasized our common humanity across boundaries of culture and race, and sowed the seeds of future possibilities. The idea of the fundamental oneness of humanity has remained with me. For me still, knowledge comes from reading. Words I read in primary and secondary schools about the importance of books lodged deep into my consciousness. 'Books are the storehouses of all the knowledge in the world.' The printed word still retains its magic. Reading and all that it entails — discovery, exploration, adventure — is my life. For that, I am grateful to my 'colonial' heritage.

As I saw the world of my childhood fragment before my own eyes, I knew that I had to write down what I knew, both as a record as well as a reminder. Easier said than done. 'Mr Tulsi's Store' is the most difficult book I have ever written. And, therefore, more rewarding. I am not sure that after this book, I will be able to enjoy the kind of history I was used to. I don't regret the rupture, although there is, of course, a certain sadness in parting company with someone who has been with you a long time, been good to and for you. That feeling of loss, though, is compensated by the thrill and challenge of setting sail in unfamiliar winds. Time will tell, as it always does, whether I took the right turn at the right moment. But it has been a bountiful journey so far.

*Turnings* is not a sequel to *Mr Tulsi's Store*, but it attempts the same task of capturing the lived experiences of unwritten lives. It too is about margins and movements, a record and a reminder of a time, a place and a people. It is

intended for the reader interested in the stories of fragile lives half hidden from view, just beneath the surface, simmering, stories of ordinary folk — teachers, farmers, workers, children, rural shopkeepers, housewives — caught in the grip of turning times, forced to change, adapt and move on. The book is not for the smugly self-referential, endlessly self-indulgent and aggressively self-promoting literary critics who drain the humanities of their true significance through obscurantist prose without saying much at all. If *Turnings* fosters a deeper and more sympathetic awareness of the predicaments facing a people caught in circumstances beyond their control, my purpose in writing it will have been amply achieved.

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*Mr Tulsi's Store: A Fijian Journey* was published by Pandanus Books (Canberra) in 2001. It was judged one of ten 'Notable Books' for the Asia-Pacific for 2002 by the committee of the San Francisco-based Kiriyaama Prize and was 'Highly Commended' 2002 ACT 'Book of the Year'.