

BHARAT



Short story



Satendra Nandan

A short story from the forthcoming collection of Fijian Stories, Ashes and Waves, by Satendra Nandan, Fiji's leading writer.



*Sabarmati ke sant tune kar diya kamaal
De di azaadi hame khadag bina dhal...
(O, saint of Sabarmati, you've done wonders!
You gave us freedom without the sword or shield...)*

He should have gone – gone to Fiji to see his Bhabhi – as he called her.

She is dying of cancer – cancer of the intestines – he was told in a brief telephone conversation that had ended abruptly.

Instead he's at Sydney Airport on his way to Singapore – SIN says his boarding card. Nadi should have been his destination – but so often one's destination and destiny are so different.

Like two brothers, two streams diverging from the same river.

His elder brother had married Guddi. She'd come to the village decked as a Hindu bride in a red silk saree with a *goonghat* – veil – hiding her face as an incandescent moon in a dark cloud, with golden lining.

Her palms and feet were marked with henna, eyes with *kajal*; a nose ring glinted in the light of a Tilley lamp; a necklace of mohars – gold sovereigns – in thick black thread hung round her delicate neck and numerous coloured glass bangles on both her arms.

Ashok had never seen someone so beautiful or so beautifully dressed. Since then, though unmarried, he always wondered at the fresh beauty of a bride; like the dawn it's never dull.

Everybody had to pay some money to see her face, touch her virgin cheeks, and there was a row of women relatives who were keen for *moohekha*, seeing the face.

Ashok, too, stood among the women and giggling girls. And suddenly Guddi whispered, 'Mamma, get me a bowl of water.'

He rushed out to get her a *pyala* of pani; there were no glasses in their house then. She had taken the bowl of water, gently touching Ashok's hand and sliding her veil to let him glimpse her radiant face with large, luminous eyes.

That moment of a stranger's sadness in a new home remained etched on his imagination. And Ashok was barely nine years old.

Things grew. And the river flowed. And the grass was always green on the river's banks. His brother and Bhabhi had seven children in seven years, four boys and three girls. His brother said: "Ashok should study; I'd till the land."

He had rented 12 acres from the CSR Company of Australia and Ratu Malakai of Malowai. His Bhabhi cooked for Ashok and the farm workers in the fire and smoke, rain or shine: rotis for breakfast, rotis for lunch and rice for dinner and pots of curries – vegetables, meat and all kinds of sea creatures floating in an ocean of oil and spices. She created a sense of an abun-

dance of food.

But everything was curried and Ashok's brother praised her cooking and the speed with which she could prepare a meal for a score of workers on the cane-fields.

Meanwhile, Ashok studied and travelled in pursuit of enlightenment through education – realms of gold he hadn't dreamed of.

Most Hindu weddings in Fiji in that era had three important days: *telwaan*, *bhatwaan* and *shaadi*, the wedding day.

Telwaan and *bhatwaan* were held separately at the groom's and bride's home, *bhatwaan* being the most important day at the groom's.

On *shaadi*, the *baraat*, a procession, left for the bride's place where the marriage ceremony was solemnised with interminable mantras at the most propitious time of the night, and fiery rituals after the midnight hour.

The *baraat* returned the following day with the bride.

During *telwaan*, my brother was well malished, massaged, by young married women of the village and some relatives.

Ashok saw his brother sitting in his brown shorts, bare-chested, hair oiled, erect like Shiva's lingam, and those young women massaging, kneading almost every part of his fair body with *haldi-tumeric* and oil, freshly ground and mixed.

As a child, he sat and watched, dreaming of his turn, if ever he grew up.

A group of women sang to the monotonous rhythm of the *dholak*.

How, where and by whom that drum rhythm was invented was a mystery to him, but its sound was always unmistakable, relentless and unending.

Only Indian village women, he thought, could have invented and sustained beating the drum with such monotony at every wedding.

Their singing, however, was vigorous and full of sexual innuendos. There was much laughter and gaiety and the taunting of the young, would-be groom. Whenever his brother understood their meanings, he would grin baring his white teeth sharpened on stolen sugarcane.

Psychologically during *telwaan*, Ashok's brother was being prepared for conjugal bliss or blitz.

His body, well-oiled and gleaming with turmeric, looked golden and youthful. Ashok and his village companions watched enraptured.

Whenever he saw them staring at him, he'd yell, "Arre, *chutias*, what are you doing here? Go and look after the cattle!"

Ashok would then slink away hurt only to return behind him,

to see his bare, hairless back being caressed by young women with lovely large hands, shapely breasts, slightly bared, and intense longing in their dreamy eyes; sometimes dazzling with tears, darkened with unfulfilled desires.

Bhatwaan

Bhatwaan, the second day, was the big day at the groom's place. Relatives and guests from far and near started arriving in the afternoon.

Cooking for several hundred people, including every village child, began early in the morning.

It was a communal cooking done mainly by men. And always only vegetarian food was served on large dalo leaves, which our Fijian friends, from across the river, gave generously and were invited in return.

The people from the *koro* were very much on the fringes of our village life. If they came to any of our ceremonies, it was to watch from a distance the strange customs and rituals of Indian ways, have a few bowls of grog, eat and then disappear as wraiths at midnight.

They remained strangers to our rites and ceremonies, indeed to our way of life.

More than a river or colonial history – centuries of cultural distance, differences – divided our worlds. Ashok couldn't imagine two more varied cultures living in two villages separated by a shallow river that they crossed often for food but not for that fellow feelings for the Other, your neighbour.

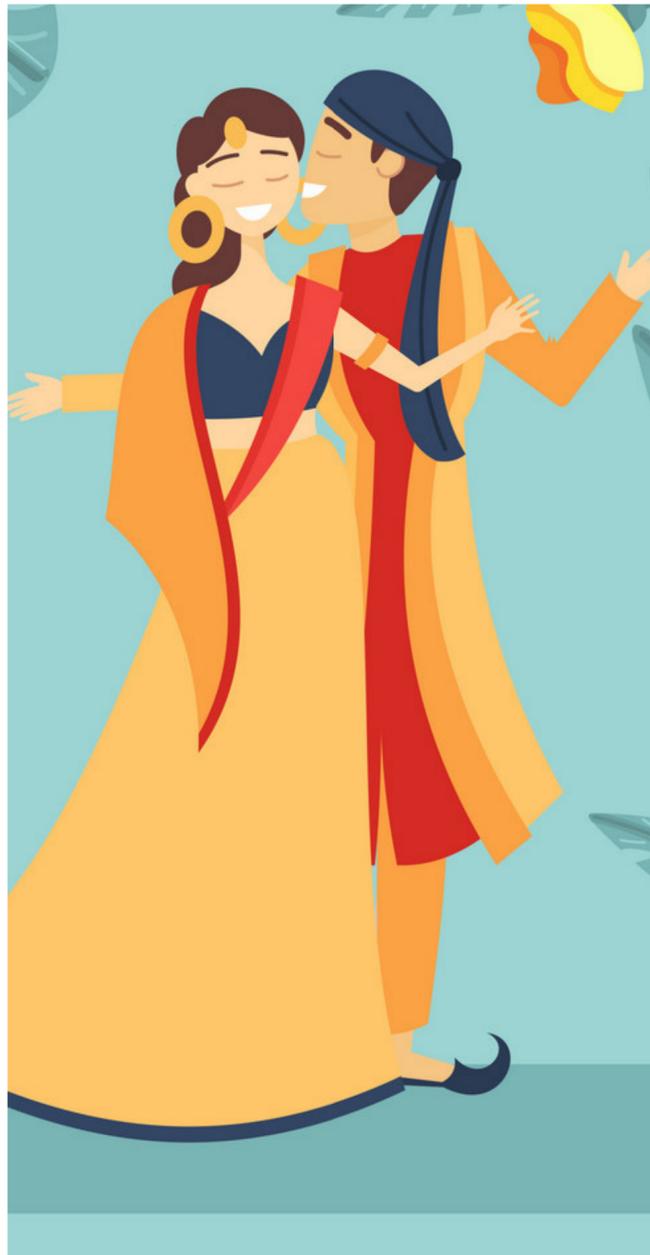
The native community was not given the *neota*, the invitation with yellow rice that a *nau* distributed in the village and its vicinity; they were just called, casually.

To the Indians *neota* was important. The *nau*, an especially hired man, usually a poor relative, would ride his horse a week before the wedding and distribute grains of yellow rice to every home in the village. If one deliberately left out one or two homes because they were *murgichors*, there was always the risk of your cows being stolen or cane burnt, or your house stoned on the day of the *shaadi* when most of the men had gone in the *baraat* party.

So virtually everyone was invited: young and old, men and women, in-laws and outlaws.

If someone turned up uninvited and complained that no *neota* was given to him, Ashok's Father showed his remorse and cursed the unreliable *nau*, feigning great anger.

Weddings gave colour and a sense of festivity to our drab village life. And it developed into a season of



sorts.

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CONTINUES ON PAGE 11

FROM PAGE 10

The grand affair continues

Ashok's brother's *bhatwaan* was a fairly grand affair: He was marrying into a relatively rich and cultured family in Sabeto, a village known for its progressive ways.

His would-be sister-in-law – Bhabhi – was, by our village and family standards, quite a smart, attractive, Class VIII educated girl. She lived in a large, loving extended family.

Guddi was the middle daughter of the second eldest brother amongst four girmit brothers.

The eldest never married; he just worked on the farm; the second was Guddi's father; the third, Pyarelal, was a taxi driver and the youngest, Chunnillal, was the brightest and the most cultured.

He never worked on the farm and was always dressed in severely starched clothes and black, shining shoes. He loved Indian music and moved mainly with school masters.

It was his responsibility to find husbands for his brother's several pretty daughters. He himself had only one son from a tall, fair looking woman with a long nose on which shone a gold nose-ring.

Guddi's mother was, or must have been, a beautiful young woman when she married.

She was a generous woman and had eight children: four girls and four boys. She sat in the courtyard smoking her 'cigarettes' rolled in dried, brown leaves and being served by her abundant family.

Ashok had lived at their large home for several weeks before his brother's marriage.

The *baatchet* for his brother's wedding had begun a year earlier: His brother had been finally betrothed to Guddi.

It was the first step toward the marriage bond. Six months later, after that initial, small ceremony, one afternoon riding Charlie, full speed, Ashok fell off his charger and broke his left arm and wailed.

Father, after cursing the horse, his mother and Ashok, took him in a borrowed cargo lorry to Bui, Guddi's mother, who advised that Ashok should be left in her care.

She knew someone who would heal him in no time. He remained at Bui's, full of women and children, for several weeks.

Every morning Bui would take him to an old girmitiya Bharat Bhaiya who, after reciting a few mantras, would *maalish* his broken arm with pig's fat.

It was agony but the old witch doctor paid scant heed to a child's screams. Only Bui would wipe his tears. After six weeks of such brutal treatment, his arm began to look

normal and straight again.

By then Bui's affection had made him feel at home.

In the evenings Ashok and others would gather in Baba Chunnillal's bure and see him wind his gramophone, place a black disc, and as it spun, marvellous music poured forth.

In the stillness of the evening, the sounds of music were heard in the valley as the sun, in its last spurt before dying, made clouds glow red, orange and saffron. And the shadows of the mountain, voices from the gramophone, gave us a sweet sadness of the evening.

Indian songs in childhood had filled Ashok's heart with a strange sadness, as if foretelling of things passing, and yet to pass.

Chunnillal gave that gramophone as a *daan*, gift, to Ashok's brother and Guddi at their wedding ceremony. One of Ashok girmitya uncles donated a calf – *godaan* – a gift of a cow, but only after the midnight hour.

Living at Guddi's place for over a month was, for Ashok, a most enjoyable experience.

There was something wholesome, large and prosperous about this family. He often remembered the evening Father brought him back home; and as he went to get Lali from near Nani's orchard, suddenly an overwhelming sense of loss gripped his heart.

He was keen to come home but he hadn't quite realised how much he would miss the kindness and warmth of these strangers amongst whom he'd dwelt briefly and felt an abundance of life and family affections. Since then this feeling of emptiness, a sense of desolation, would overwhelm him on many occasions whenever he had to say goodbye to those who, in some way, loved and cared for him.

To think of life as a series of good-byes.

The night arrives

On the evening of his brother's *bhatwaan*, the village had borrowed Bisnath's harmonium, Parsu's *dholak*, Ram Chandar's *dandtaal*, and Nini's pair of cymbals.

As the night thickened, guests started arriving; kava was being served and children were being given their meals on large green leaves. The musical instruments lay rather forlornly in the hissing light of a Tilley lamp which needed pumping every half hour.

We were all waiting for Amichand, Nadi Town's famous taxi-driver musician, who could perform remarkable musical feats simultaneously with his mouth, hands and feet.

People waited for Amichand's taxi

to arrive but no headlights were seen in the darkening village, when the bats had settled in the mango grove like *nagonchis*.

Suddenly, from the darkness, who should march into the circle of light but Bharat dressed in a red, long-sleeved, silk shirt, white trousers, new black boots with a purple scarf casually curled round his neck.

His hair was dyed black and well-oiled in *Brylcreem*. His face was heavily powdered. Ashok and his cowherd companions, were quite stunned by his appearance.

When they saw him arrive, they mumbled, 'Ram, Ram, Dada', but he ignored them. He went straight to where the harmonium lay silent.

Bharat removed the covers delicately. Every eye was on him; people stopped talking. Boys stopped serving grog and waited much to the annoyance of several groggy guests. Bharat began playing the harmonium, a lilting film tune:

*Aankhiyan milake, jia bharmake, chale nahin jana
Oh, oh, chale nahin jana...
(Now that our eyes have met, our hearts beat,
Do not go away, leaving me alone...)*

In that setting, with the Tilley lamp burning brightly, the night settling on the cane-fields and the river, the tune had a melancholy quality. It must have been heard across the river into the Fijian *koro*.

We had never seen this glamorous aspect of Bharat. The storyteller and the mystic masseur had become a singer; the night and the circle of light added mystery to the artist. After playing that tune, he began taking the *alaap* – getting his voice level right for the melody of his words. This went on for quite a while until Bro, wiping his grog wet moustache, shouted, 'Arre bhai, kuch gaio ki raat bhar bas bhe, bhe kario!'

Bharat cast him a scathing look of contempt and carried on *alaap*ing. Then Nini came and sat next to Bharat and started thumping the goat-skinned *dholak*.

Soon a new rhythm and harmony emerged in the duet. They were then joined by Shiu Narayan Kukri who fiddled the iron *dandtaal*. Now the real music began.

As children, we loved the sound of the harmonium, the *dholak* and the *dandtaal*. It was the closest we got to a childhood orchestra. After about 15 minutes of his orchestration, Bharat began singing a sad Hindi song.

In between, he mixed it with some *Ramayan chaupais*, couplets; Nini Ram Chandar played *dholak* with passion and style. As the children gathered round them, occasionally

Nini would thump a little head and resume the beating of the drum without missing a beat.

Such music from such simple instruments. Bharat sang a song about Mahatma Gandhi:

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De di azaadi hame khadag bina dhal...*

*(O, saint of Sabarmati, you've done wonders!
You gave us freedom without the sword or shield...)*

He sang with such feeling, a song about the Mahatma's fight against the British, that everyone clapped and Bro shouted, 'Wah! Wah!'

Bharat was sweating, his powdered face had rivulets streaming down a craggy slope; Nini was wet all over, his nylon shirt glistening with perspiration; only Shiu Narayan Kukri looked serene with his iron *dandtaal*.

The singing must have gone on for about two hours. People forgot about Amichand. Then Bharat stopped as suddenly as he had begun. Many went out of the tin shed to piddle on the cane leaves and came back for the meal.

The musical instruments lay on the mat, silent, with a few burnt-out cigarette butts and matchsticks. In the circle of light, it was still, soundless.

After the meal, served amidst considerable confusion, Bharat disappeared around midnight.

Ashok didn't see him again and when Bisnath, our local singer, came in to sing after the meal, people started leaving for their homes.

The next evening

The following night at Bhaiwa's wedding at Guddi's home, Amichand performed his extraordinary musical feats: Playing the harmonium with his feet, holding the flute and the mouth organ simultaneously to the amazement of many Sabeto wrestlers.

In the excitement Ashok blew up a Chinese cracker in his hand and cried quietly.

His brother got married at the propitious time late in the night: I'm the words, you're the melody; you're the words, I'm the melody.

Next morning he brought Guddi in a taxi, draped in a resplendent sari, her face looking fearful and unexplored like the *poonam* moon seen after a gentle night drizzle, through trembling leaves of a tree wrapped in its beautiful, solitary mystery.

Bhabhi was barely sixteen years old.

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