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From Nadi to New Delhi: A Reading of Satendra Nandan's *Recollections of India*

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ABSTRACT

Indian diasporic literature is a remarkably rich and prominent branch of Indian literature. If we speak specifically of Indian English literature, a very large number of its writers are primarily diasporic Indians for whom writing serves as a medium to revisit India and to reclaim their Indian roots. While the excellent quality and remarkable range of literature produced by many diasporic Indian writers has been duly acknowledged and appreciated, in India and beyond, there are many more who remain, even today, unheard, uncharted, and unexplored. These are largely writers who do acknowledge their Indian past, and who carry and assert their Indianness, but who do not recognise themselves as Indians, nor do they recognise India as their homeland. For them, the homeland is that island which their grandparents had decided to adopt as a new home for themselves, and as the future homeland for their posterity. It is from within this complex and layered relationship to India, neither the homeland nor entirely foreign, neither fully claimed nor fully relinquished, that their writing emerges. This article addresses this unexplored territory of Indian diasporic literature by focusing on the writings of one of the most prominent Indo-Fijian writers, namely Satendra Nandan. The article is primarily an analysis of Nandan's non-fiction, particularly his autobiography, Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story (2001), and his collection of political essays, Fiji: A Paradise in Pieces, Writing Ethics-Politics (2000), in which he not only recounts and reflects upon his sojourn in India, but also offers critical and incisive observations on India – its history, culture, society, and contemporary politics – as well as his own evolving understanding of the idea of India itself.

Keywords: *Nonfiction, Indian Diaspora, Autobiography, Girmitiya, Homeland, India and Indianness.*

Introduction

India's diaspora is not a homogenous or monolithic entity. As an extension of India across the world, it is as diverse and pluralistic an assemblage as Indian civilization and culture itself. It contains, on the one hand, extremely successful Indian technocrats, professionals, and intellectuals, located at the metropolitan centres of the West, in America, Europe, and Australia, and on the other, both legally and illegally migrated skilled workforces spread across the world. And then there are those who, for a very long time, were entirely cut off from India,

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and had disappeared from the view and imagination of Indians altogether, these are the indentured Indian labourers who were transported to British plantation islands in the Atlantic and the Pacific, and their descendants, who had bundled up their own India in their gathries and carried it with them, transplanting and nurturing it in those new-found islands and homelands, building, far from India, many little Indias. The heterogeneity of this ever-expanding and growing assemblage of Indias, or Indians, across the globe finds its fullest and most revealing expression in the rich and varied literary and artistic representations produced by the Indian diaspora. Put together, these representations constitute a kaleidoscopic constellation of a multitude of diasporic Indian writers living everywhere and anywhere in the world outside India. Despite this, there are only a few who have managed to gain popularity, attract readership, and receive critical attention. Those who did succeed in making their mark and presence felt, particularly among Indian readership, are the ones who belong to the 'new' diaspora: those who migrated to the UK or to North America, or those who, emerging from the 'old' diaspora, managed to relocate themselves within these first world nations.

Therefore, when we speak of the representative writers of diasporic literature, the names that immediately come to mind are V.S. Naipaul, M.G. Vassanji, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, G.V. Desani, and there are many others too who are indeed diasporic Indian writers, but who are perhaps not known in India as diasporic writers at all, such as Raja Rao, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Amitava Ghosh, Kiran Desai, to name only a few – partly because they are taught across Indian universities as the pioneers of Indian English Literature, as Indian writers first and foremost, their diasporic location either bracketed away or treated as incidental to their literary identity. Indeed, Indian English literature, especially fiction and non-fiction, has been enriched and developed more by these writers writing and representing India from a migrant's perspective, from the productive distance of elsewhere. On the one hand, their imaginings offer incisive reflections on contemporary India, unravelling its socio-cultural and political shifts and intricacies, delivering, in other words, a version of India that is often more searching and unsparing than what gets written from within. On the other hand, Indian English literature poses a significant challenge to the dominance of British English literature by "writing back" to the empire: reclaiming the language of the coloniser and bending it to the purposes of the colonised, asserting, in the very act of writing, that the empire's cultural authority is neither final nor uncontested.

While the excellent quality and remarkable range of literature produced by many diasporic Indian writers has been duly acknowledged and appreciated, in India and beyond, there are many more who remain, even today, unheard, uncharted, and unexplored. These are largely writers who do acknowledge their Indian past, and who carry and assert their Indianness, but who do not recognise themselves as Indians, nor do they recognise India as their homeland. For them, the homeland is that island which their grandparents had decided to adopt as a new home for themselves, and as the future homeland for their posterity. It is from within this complex and layered relationship to India, neither the homeland nor entirely foreign, neither fully claimed nor fully relinquished, that their writing emerges. This article addresses this unexplored territory of Indian diasporic literature by focusing on the writings of one of the most prominent Indo-Fijian writers, namely Satendra Nandan. The article is primarily an analysis of Nandan's non-fictional writings, particularly his autobiography, Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story (2001), and his collection of political essays, Fiji: A Paradise in Pieces, Writing Ethics-Politics (2000), in which he not only recounts and reflects upon his sojourn in India, but also offers critical and incisive observations on India: its history, culture, society, and contemporary politics, as well as his own evolving understanding of the idea of India itself. Every writer of the Indian diaspora writes and imagines – or reimagines – India from a distinct "position of enunciation" (Hall 392): that position from which speaking, writing, and representing become possible, and which is never neutral, never universal. It is this position that separates, for instance, the old diaspora from the new, and yet even within the old diaspora there is no single, shared viewpoint from which India is seen or imagined. Every location and every position is shaped and influenced by its own individual experiences, histories, cultures, and identities, and it is precisely this that makes each representation of India in diasporic writing unique and distinct in itself, irreducible to any other, and resistant to any generalisation that would flatten the extraordinary diversity of what the Indian diaspora has produced.

Studying Satendra Nandan's writings provides, in turn, an understanding of the Girmitiya position and viewpoint, that position which is an essential element of his identity and history, and which shapes everything he writes from. What makes Nandan special and unique is that he is among those rare writers who, despite all opportunities to settle elsewhere: in India, the land of his ancestors; in England, the land of the colonial masters; or in North America, where many contemporary educated Indo-Fijians had chosen to relocate, makes a conscious choice, a call from conscience, to return to his beloved home and homeland, Fiji. He goes back not out

of compulsion but out of belonging, out of a deep and unambiguous identification with the land that his people had seeded and nurtured across generations. But it is precisely this return that makes what follows so devastating. He is forced to abandon that homeland, made to leave the very place he had chosen over every other; and this traumatic event, this banishment of Nandan and his fellow Indo-Fijians from their homeland, breaks him in ways that are total and irreversible. It shatters not just a life and a career but an entire sense of self, an entire architecture of belonging. And yet, paradoxically, it is this very rupture, this violent dislocation, that provides him with a distinct position from which to reflect: nostalgically, painfully, and critically on the 'lost' homeland of Fiji, but also, at a longer remove, on India, the land of his ancestors, to explore the Indian and Fijian elements that together constitute his self, his identity, and his understanding of where, and to whom, he belongs.

Thus, Nandan's political memoirs and autobiography do not merely express Nandan's own wounds and pain, but also give voice to the collective pain and suffering of all those Indo-Fijians who wanted to stay rooted in the land seeded and nurtured by their ancestors across generations – those who resisted the temptation of migrating elsewhere, with the prospects of a better future and the possibility of becoming global cosmopolitan citizens, and who chose instead to remain, to belong, to stay. If Fiji: A Paradise in Pieces, through its political memoirs, reflects upon that violent moment that ruptures Nandan's self and identity, the moment that tears apart not just a political life but an entire sense of selfhood and belonging, then his Requiem for a Rainbow, his autobiography, does not merely record a life; rather, it is an attempt to reconstruct the ruptured self through the very act of writing. It is, in this sense, a literary enactment of what Derek Walcott understood when he announced that "the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love that took its symmetry for granted when it was whole" (69) for it is precisely in the act of gathering the scattered pieces of a broken identity, and narrating them back into coherence, that Nandan's autobiography finds both its urgency and its meaning. What had been broken, the autobiography seeks to rejoin and to remake.

Nandan's autobiography is not simply a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, and in particular, on the development of his personality" (Lejeune 4). It is not merely "a story of the self", but rather, as Paul John Eakin, in How Our Lives Become Stories (1999), announces autobiography to be, a

process of "making the self." Eakin further dismantles the myth of autonomy and valorizes the "relational life," arguing that autobiographies are never autonomous because no self is, or could ever be, autonomous – for all selves are constituted through their relationships to others, to communities, and to histories, and it is only through those relationships that a self becomes legible, to itself and to others. In this sense, Nandan's autobiography neither narrates an autonomous or frozen self, nor does it simply recount an individual life, but rather, it ends up creating an identity, making the self, but that self too is not individual. It is, rather, a collective self, the journey of an entire community, and perhaps this is precisely why Nandan subtitles his autobiography "A Fijian Indian Story," signalling from the outset that his life cannot be read apart from the life of his people, that the "I" of his autobiography is always also a "we."

Moreover, narrating a life for Nandan, the diasporic Indian, is not simply a self-making process, it is also a process of searching for the self. It is a deconstructive process, a process that unravels the complex diasporic identity, which is inherently dual or hyphenated, always located between two worlds, two histories, two sets of claims upon the self, and never fully at home in either. Nandan’s autobiography, in this respect, becomes a process of discovering the self, one that not only helps identify the Indian and Fijian selves that constitute his diasporic identity, but also helps him trace the fault lines between them: to understand where the two selves converge and where they pull apart, where they sustain each other and where they are in quiet, unresolved tension. It also helps him define, with clarity and honesty, his own meanings and ideas of India, what India is to him, as distinct from what it is to those who have never left it, and helps him see what distances him from India, and what differentiates him not only from Indians living in India, but also from Indians settled elsewhere in other diasporic communities, for whom the coordinates of identity, loss, and belonging are configured differently. In this way, the autobiography becomes simultaneously an act of self-constitution and self-differentiation, a text in which Nandan discovers not only who he is, but who he is not, and in that discovery, arrives at what is perhaps the most searching and honest account of what it means to be Indo-Fijian: to carry two worlds within oneself, and to belong, completely, to neither.

Nandan’s autobiography does not simply remember and reflect upon the life and time he had spent in India, he also discovers, in the act of writing, an India that exceeds and complicates what he had anticipated. He reflects upon the India that he encounters and explores, and offers incisive and perceptive critique on the socio-cultural and political transformations and

developments that India undergoes. In this process of discovery, Nandan straddles two Indias: the actual India – the land, its people, its contradictions, its textures – and the India that he had inherited from his grandparents, carried across the kalapani in fragments and stories, which serves as his referral point, his inherited compass, as he explores and unravels what he understands to be the civilisational and cultural core of India. A critical reading and analysis of his writings on India will therefore not only help understand the position from which he reimagines India, that position which constitutes for him a distinct vantage point, neither entirely outside nor entirely within, but will also help illuminate his idea of India itself: what India means to a man for whom it was never the homeland, but has always been, in some deep and unresolvable sense, home.

The Return of the Proud Grandson: India and the Girmitiya Self

Nandan was born and brought up in Fiji, an island country located seven seas away in the south-west of the Pacific Ocean, in a Girmitiya, or indentured, Indian family. It was an island to which his grandparents had migrated from India to work in the British plantation colonies for a stipulated period, with the hope of making some fortune and finally returning home at the end of the term of their contract (girmit). His grandfather, the prodigal son of India, sadly could never return home, or perhaps, rather, like thousands of fellow Girmitiyas, decided not to go back to the abandoned homeland, but to stay in the new-found land and work there to build a home, and a homeland, for their children and grandchildren. Even having gone far from India, they could not take India far from themselves. They had abandoned the idea of return, but the longing for return remained. And perhaps it is for this reason that they reconnected with India nostalgically, by transplanting its culture and traditions in the host-land, assembling, piece by piece, a little India of their own in the islands of the Pacific. The grandfather's suppressed desire to return, that longing to reconnect with the lost homeland, was, decades later, fulfilled by Nandan, who gets the opportunity to visit India, the homeland, the sacred land, the punyabhoomi of his grandparents, for higher studies. Nandan had the option of choosing between New Zealand and India to pursue higher education, but instead of neighbouring New Zealand, he chose India, a choice that was not merely geographical or academic, but deeply personal, rooted in a sense that India was closer to his own self, to what he was and where he had come from, in ways that New Zealand could never be. And in doing so, Nandan claims, he seemed to have established "a rainbow bridge across the dark waters, kalapani, of the seven seas" (Requiem 138) which his grandparents had once crossed, never to

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return, healing, in some measure, the wound of that original departure, and closing, across generations, a circle that had remained open for nearly a century.

With this sense of familiarity and deep connect with India, Nandan, the proud grandson of a Girmitiya, makes "the first return passage to India", the country that had captivated his imagination, "a land," as Nandan proclaims, "of mystery, magic and ancient mantras, from where all our grandfathers and grandmothers had come" (138). He arrives in India in the early Nineteen Sixties as a young student, and over the course of six and a half formative years that he spends there, he not only acquires a formidable education but also deepens his ties with India, discovering the meaning and layers of the country, and forging life-long relationships with its people. Nandan arrives in India around the same time as V.S. Naipaul's first visit to the land of his ancestors, around the time of the publication of the first book of Naipaul's India trilogy, and quite like him, Nandan too, in his initial days, feels despondent and disappointed to notice the squalor, poverty, and chaos of India, finding it difficult to survive in a world so unlike anything he had known. As he himself says, "Delhi became a place of deepening disillusionment. I found it difficult to cope with the daily preoccupations of life and a sense of loneliness crept into me as I felt buffeted by this tumultuous world that flowed on like the city's nullahs in the monsoon: life giving, life taking" (Requiem 145). He was not prepared for the multitudinous and ubiquitous life of India, and what astonished and perturbed him the most was the discovery that the India of his childhood imagination, that India which had seeped into his diasporic consciousness with immense force, through her epics, songs, the memories of grandparents, films, pictures of gods and goddesses, portraits of Nehru and Gandhi, posters of Lord Krishna stealing butter in a kitchen, of Ram and Sita in an idyllic forest, was quite different from the India and the Indians he jostles with on the cobbled streets of Delhi (Requiem141). The imagined India and the encountered India were two separate countries, and Nandan had to learn, painfully and slowly, to navigate the distance between them.

Nandan finds himself completely unprepared for India, it appears to him as though he had arrived without any prior knowledge or readiness, and indeed, no one had prepared him for the cultural shock that greets him in his initial days. But Nandan comes to believe that this initial despair was the outcome of his own ignorance: the India he had known was an imaginary India, a mythical or mythologised India, "an old and perhaps an ancient India" (Naipaul) from where his ancestors had migrated to Fiji. He had no knowledge of the real or actual India, its people,

its life, its culture, its overwhelming dailiness. But he soon overcomes this initial despair and disappointment, and finds, surprisingly, that his very "ignorance" proves far more useful than any prior knowledge might have been, for it allows him to approach the actual India as a totally strange and new country, without the burden of expectation or the distortion of preconception. It gave him the freedom to explore India without baggage or bias. India, Nandan proclaims, is "a human country: it grows upon you like love in an arranged marriage", and therefore, after the first few months, India begins to give Nandan "an immensely tender sense of belongingness" (Requiem 134). The rationalist or dispassionate critic is soon replaced by a sympathetic one, and Nandan begins to approach India with an eye of sympathy, and as a result, India too starts revealing her "many treasures like a woman opening herself" (Requiem 149). He realises that the best way to know a country is to know its people, for it is the people who represent a country and give it meaning, and there is no better medium through which to know and understand a place than through the individuals who inhabit it. As he writes: "As I got to know a few people, I began to see the generosity of the country itself. There is, I think, no better way of knowing a country except through a few individuals. It's amazing how deeply one's view of a country is affected by the affections of a few people: both India and Australia testify to that for me. Amidst all the poverty and pain, I found a splendour of spirit in these people" (Requiem 150).

Thus, instead of concentrating on the disappointing realities, the ruins and the disorder that one notices at the surface, the things that every visitor or outsider encounters upfront the moment they enter India, Nandan decides to delve deeper into the inward strengths of India and aims at investigating what he understands to be the spirit of India. A dispassionate reader, or a casual visitor, would perhaps stop at this superficial reality, what is visible only to the external eye, what presents itself at first glance, the same disillusionment that Nandan himself witnesses in his early days. But as Nandan allows the initial impression to settle, as he continues to live in India and develops what can only be described as a patient and sympathetic approach to knowing, he begins to unearth the multiple layers beneath, and realises that it would be a horrendous error to take the superficial image, that first encounter, as the real character and spirit of India. Just as any avid reader knows not to judge a book by its cover, or to define a man by his appearance, so too it would be an erratum, and a deeply misleading one, to judge a nation by its outward image alone. This is not to claim that one must not acknowledge the "terrible brutalities" or the myriad other problems that afflict India. Every nation has its own

set of challenges to overcome. But challenges do not define or reflect the true spirit of a people, that spirit lies hidden deeper, beneath the surface, waiting to be discovered by those willing to look. Nandan avers that for him India is more of ‘an ocean than a sub-continent’, and therefore to unravel its spirit, one needs to look beyond the ruins, the ebbs and flows, and dive deep, for there, in the depths, one finds a whole life, an entirely different world waiting to be encountered. Nandan concedes that it is obvious that "when one travels from the New to the Old world, especially of the orient, one is often bewildered, even terrified, by the civilization mulched by dung, decay, death and an acceptance of all these", but he emphasises that one should not get carried away by these superficial realities. He underlines, with the precision of someone who has looked long and hard, that "far below the dusty surface a whole way of life is breathing, living and regenerating like some subterranean current tossing, turning and ceaselessly creating those variegated marine universes" (Requiem 151).

And it is for this reason that one must excavate deeper – for the deeper one goes, the more India opens herself up, revealing what she keeps guarded from the impatient or the hostile eye. As one does, one finds, in Nandan's own words, that "amidst the ruins and dreams of emperors and empire builders life flows with uncanny abundance. Life had to be celebrated: you saw it in the laughter, sweat and tears, in their festivals and quarrels, in the effigies of Ravana and his demon comrades…in their overcrowded buses and the serenity in the Buddha Jayanti park, in the words of Nehru and under the shadows of Ashoka trees. In every shadow, you felt, you were seeing the child of light" (151). Nandan furthermore argues that no single reader can offer a holistic understanding of any country. The vision and capacity for understanding of critics and readers is always limited — each approaches a country from their own comprehension, their own subject-position, their own angle of seeing, and what one gets, inevitably, is only a partial and limited knowledge and understanding of that country. He argues that in this process it is not the country that one gets to know or fully explores, in fact, the act of reading a country becomes, rather, an examination of the reader or critic themselves. It is as if the country or nation turns the tables and tests the reader's knowledge and their very capacity to know, to see, and to understand. As Nandan announces: "Delhi, like a great book, read me: I wasn't reading it. Delhi demanded my inner resources", and with time, Delhi deepened his "understanding of the cycle of life and death. Shiva's dance of destruction and creation." He further claims that "few cities disturb you so deeply as Delhi for a single journey from one end of the city to the other may show you that the human cycle is truly endless" (151).

Thus, Nandan establishes that every reading of India is, in fact, a misreading, a partial truth, a fragment of a larger and ultimately uncontainable whole. What one arrives at is never the idea or meaning of India itself, but rather the critic's or reader's own idea of India, a construction shaped and conditioned by the limits of their position, their history, and their capacity for sympathy or its absence. Every interpretation or reading of India, its culture, its civilisation, its spirit, is therefore, in the strictest sense, a misinterpretation, which is precisely why one finds such varied, divergent, and often contradictory understandings of India across the range of those who have attempted to read it. In this sense, Nandan offers a post-structuralist critique of the very act of reading, a position that Harold Bloom articulates and establishes in A Map of Misreading (1975), where he declares at the outset that "reading, as my title indicates, is a belated and all-but-impossible act, and if strong is always a misreading" (3). For Bloom, misreading is not a failure of reading but its very condition, since no reader can access the pure or original meaning of a text, every act of reading is necessarily mediated by the reader's own position, prior formations, and conscious and unconscious investments. Nandan's formulation maps onto this with remarkable precision: India is not a fixed, readable object but an inexhaustible text that each reader inevitably rewrites from within the limits of their own inner resources, which is why, as Nandan himself puts it, Delhi read him rather than he reading Delhi. India thus becomes, for Nandan, that complex text of which no single, simple understanding or meaning is possible. While Nandan accepts that no final, conclusive, or holistic reading of India can ever be achieved, this does not diminish the value of any individual attempt to read it. Much like Raja Rao, who declares, in his The Meaning of India (1996), that for centuries India has remained a mystery, a subject that scholars and readers have endlessly explored and studied, Nandan recognises that all these readings, each in its own way, offer their own understanding of India, but none constitutes the defining reading, none arrives at what Rao calls "an indication by any means of the truth of India." India, on the contrary, existed before all these readings and will continue to exist despite them, whether exalted or dispassionate, because India, as Raja Rao claims, is not “a country (desa), it is a perspective (darsana)” (5). Every reading, however partial or incomplete, is nonetheless significant and valuable in itself, because it offers a fresh perspective, a new angle of approach, a further dimension of understanding. And it is precisely for this reason that it becomes imperative to examine what kind of India it is that Nandan explores from his Girmitiya position of enunciation, and what ideas and meanings his readings foreground, what they illuminate, and what, by the very nature of his unique vantage point, they make visible that no other position of reading could.

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Reading India: Multicultural, Spiritualism, and the Idea of Indianness

The first thing that struck Nandan, right at the very beginning of his arrival in India, was how alienated he felt. Coming to India, which, by his own account, was closer to his personal self than New Zealand had ever been, he had expected to feel at home. He was shocked to find, despite all his Indianness and all the knowledge of India he had acquired while growing up in the Indo-Fijian community in Fiji, that he was "different from the India and the Indians he jostles with on the cobbled streets of Delhi." Yet while Nandan feels and registers that difference, he finds India and Indians welcoming nonetheless, open to his distinct and different idea of India, willing to absorb rather than reject it. This quality of absorbing and assimilating multiplicity is precisely what Nandan believes constitutes the real strength of India and makes it the centre of world culture and civilisation. Where most nations are engaged in the laborious and often fraught project of engineering multiculturalism, India stands as the sole organic example of an already established multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual, and multi-ethnic nation in the world. Nandan discovers that India has managed to establish a remarkable balance between the spiritual and the material world, between what Partha Chatterjee calls "the inner and the outer domain", and that the more India moved towards Western skills and achievements in the material domain, the stronger its spiritual culture became. Perhaps it is for this reason, Nandan avers, that while almost all other ancient civilisations of the world either succumbed to external pressures or disappeared entirely, it is only India that continues to be sound and strong at its foundation. This immovability, this palimpsestic nature that layers the new upon the old without erasing either, is, Nandan believes, India's glory, a conviction he shares with both Gandhi and Nehru. Despite being a as he declares: "India alone has kept the fragments of her original civilization. Arabia was overcome by Islam; Rome and Greece by Christianity; China by communism; India, despite her horrendous problems, has kept so much of the ancient past alive still" (Requiem 153).

Nandan enunciates India as a hostess who has been providing accommodation to numerous guests, each with different habits, customs, and requirements, for centuries (Tagore Nationalism 15). For centuries, caravans of people came to India, bringing with them their religions, cultures, traditions, and languages. India denied none of them entry; in fact, she made all of them Indians. She provided them space to live in and the freedom to nurture their own cultures in cohesion with all the others already present. It is for this reason that Nandan considers India ‘the beacon of multiculturalism’ in today's world, reiterating what Max Müller

had once declared, that a genuine awareness of India and Indian traditions can be used to shape a profoundly relevant multicultural society of the kind the world is so urgently trying to create (Fiji 36). Indians may not be writing formal discourses on multiculturalism, but Nandan believes they are all, in their daily lives and inherited consciousness, deeply aware of their rich multicultural past. As he writes: "to be an Indian meant to be aware of a multi-cultural heritage.

That is the core of Indianness, it is not confined to one race, one religion, unless by religion you mean God, by race Man" — and if this inherent, inbuilt quality of multi-culturalness is truly an attribute of Indians, "then," argues Nandan, "it would not be difficult for Indo-Fijians to adapt themselves to a truly Fijian society" (Fiji 43). Nandan discovers that India has not only managed to maintain her originality across this vast sweep of encounter and assimilation, but has also enriched herself through the absorption of motley cultures. The influx of various cultures and their assimilation into the mainstream of Indian life has, over centuries, shaped what may be called an Indian consciousness, a consciousness that is plural, layered, and capacious rather than singular or exclusionary. "'Indianness'," claims Nandan, "to me is a conception rich in diversity, reflecting the variousness of life, both physical and spiritual, and growing out of a civilization that is continually being enriched by the currents of many cultures, old and new. The Indian sensibility – that capacity within us that enables us to react morally and imaginatively to human situations and see what is significant from what is trivial – is conscious of its roots deriving sustenance from many cultural streams. The striking achievement of the Indian has been his ability to accept, absorb and integrate these into a vital way of life." (Fiji 34)

This multi-cultural character of India originates from a deep-rooted sense of tolerance and the spirit of sharing that has always been prevalent among Indians. If the USA is famously referred to as "a melting pot" of races and cultures, then Nandan, it seems, is proposing India as something altogether different, not a melting pot, where all that enters is dissolved and homogenised into a single dominant culture, but rather a "melted pot": a vessel in which a motley of languages, cultures, traditions, religions, and ethnicities have been absorbed and yet retained their distinct character, enriching the whole without being erased by it. India has always been open to all cultures and has remained open to procuring knowledge from every corner of the world, receiving, transforming, and giving back, without demanding conformity or seeking credit for that. It is this multicultural tradition that Nandan believes serves as the

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guiding principle for Indians living in the diasporas, a tradition that does not close in upon itself but reaches outward, much like a tree, as Nandan writes, that "is deeply rooted in its soil but opening its leaves, branches and new roots to wind, sun, and rain from every direction. It is all-inclusive, not exclusive. I hope to return to this idea of the multicultural tradition at the end and relate it to our image of being an Indian Fijian" (Fiji 35).

Sacrifice, tolerance, compassion are the principles, nurtured and valued in India across centuries, that distinguish India from other civilisations, that set it apart and give it its particular and irreducible character. The rise and fall of empires have never been a significant part of Indian history in the way it has been elsewhere, this is a colonial approach to recording history, and it is precisely why the colonisers' books are full of powerful and detailed descriptions of conquest, dominion, and dynastic succession. In India, on the contrary, as Tagore affirms, history laid importance to recording the social lives of Indians and their attainment of spiritual ideals (Nationalism 16). India has a natural tendency to forgive and forget the brutal episodes of its history, not out of weakness or amnesia, but out of a deeper commitment to what endures beyond violence. What India champions and cherishes, instead, is the idea of love, sympathy, and brotherhood. Perhaps this is why, as Nandan sees it, the great emperors like Ashoka and Akbar, who propagated ideas of tolerance, sympathy, and the coexistence of difference, managed to live on in the collective memory of Indians, while all those who plundered, looted, and ruled India through the sword have been, over time, quietly ignored and forgotten. In India, Nandan avers, materialism has always been subjected to and tempered by spiritualism, and therefore the true marker of India's civilisation is not material advancement but the sustenance of morality: what Gandhi avows as "good conduct" (53). The essence of Indianness, Nandan claims, is therefore not to be found in power or prosperity, but in "a sense of decency, a sense of humanity, a commitment to human values, and a deep concern for others, especially those who were less fortunate" (Fiji 35).

Nandan further discovers that the strength of Indians lies in their knowledge of how to create a balance between a spiritual and a material life. This distinguishing feature, the cultivation and valuing of equanimity of mind, is not merely a theoretical or philosophical proposition. It has, rather, been lived and spread among Indians by the elevated souls and saints of India, whose lives became exemplars of sacrifice and sympathy for ordinary people to draw upon across generations. As Nandan affirms: "an Indian carried about him some idea of continuity

of life and at the same time cultivated in himself the great virtue of detachment, for he knew the fragility of life itself and understood that ultimately one lives in the hearts and minds of men and women who live on. His own personal lot was never of paramount importance, hence many legends of renunciation, sacrifice and self-effacement. In times of trials and tribulations those legends become necessary for a people's survival" (35). The notions of love for humanity and brotherhood that these legends disseminated helped Indians not only to live through suffering but to bring deeper illuminations into the human heart, illuminations that enable one to recognise that one's own suffering and sacrifice, however real, is never the greatest nor the last. Gandhi named this disciplined embrace of personal suffering "passive resistance," and regarded it a far more powerful medium for attaining rights and establishing peace in the world than violence could ever be. Nandan believes that the lives of great souls serve a similar purpose, they help in the understanding of human pain and suffering by giving it meaning, proportion, and dignity. As he enunciates: "in the lives of great souls we see the realities of the human condition and accept our own. It was not a quest for a narrow egotistical identity but a conquest of it so that one attains the larger identity: to lose oneself to gain a community, to lose one's community to gain a whole country, the quintessential idea contained in the Atman-Brahman concept. There was always in the Indian a spirit of inquiry and ceaseless search for solutions to problems." (35)

Nandan believes that India's myths, philosophy, and religion are inextricably intertwined with her social life, they do not float above or apart from the daily realities of existence but are rooted in them, generated by them, and answerable to them. As Nandan argues: "it is out of their realities that India's myths, philosophies and religions are born. Not the other way round. For instance, the virtue of Indian detachment is born out of the acquisitive attachment Indians have to the material world; the concept of maya (the world as illusion) because the world of reality is intolerable; non-violence because the violence, even in the epics, is shattering the fabric of a culture; the ideas of sacredness because so much in India was being violated in the name of caste, communalism and corruption" (Requiem 155). To decipher the true meaning of India, therefore, it is essential to unravel the underlying ideas embedded in its myths, philosophy, and religion, for it is there, in those deep structures of meaning, that the spirit of India is most fully and honestly expressed. Nandan argues that the protean myths of India not only constitute the core of Indian civilisation but also shape Indian consciousness in its most fundamental ways. As suggested above, myths are the manifestation of life in all its colours

and contradictions, good and bad, virtue and vice, this world and the other world, holding them together rather than resolving them into false simplicities. They form, in Nandan's understanding, the triangle of Indian spirituality, and connect the transcendent to the mundane realities of social life, giving those realities a depth and a dignity that purely materialist frameworks cannot provide.

Nandan firmly resists the approach that views Indian myths, philosophy, and religion as escapist, as a retreat from the difficulties of lived reality into comforting abstraction. On the contrary, he asserts, they provide solutions to the very problems that emerge from the hard realities of life: they are not an evasion of the world but a way of surviving it, and, at their most powerful, of transforming it. The two great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the fountainhead of Indian culture and literature, too present a holistic vision of life. They are perhaps among the finest literature ever produced in the world. While on the surface these epics may appear to be "about exile and the battle between good and evil, at the heart of both is Shantih – the peace that passeth all understanding" (Fiji 15). They are representative of both chaos and order, war and peace, and it is precisely this duality that gives them their inexhaustible depth and their perennial relevance. Therefore, argues Nandan, these epics are to be read not merely as explications of war and violence, but also, and more essentially, as the ultimate affirmation of the victory of non-violence over violence, of the 'soul-force' over the brute force.

However, Nandan believes that this idea of India, tolerant, pluralist, secular, and multi-cultural, has, in recent times, been challenged and threatened by rising communal tension within India itself. He finds it deeply disappointing to witness the continuation of casteism, communalism, and religious sectarianism in a country whose essential character has always been defined by precisely the opposite of these forces. Communalism, Nandan believes, is the single biggest threat to India's harmony and peace, and he claims that the recent desecration of the Babri Masjid by religious fundamentalists is perhaps the most un-Indian act of independent India. This brutal act has hurt the soul of India and damaged the self-image of Indians in ways that no external aggressor could have achieved, because it is a wound self-inflicted. He suggests that Indians need to fight against any such assaults on the soul of India, against all efforts to break it apart and scatter what centuries have patiently assembled, and that the only right way to counter such fundamentalist forces is not with violence but with the Gandhian methods of

non-violence and passive resistance, which have always been the true and defining character of the Hindu religious tradition.

And yet the sympathetic critic in Nandan, that quality of understanding before condemning, of distinguishing between a civilisation and its temporary deformations, once again reminds us that it is not India which is to be condemned, but the evil of communalism, and those Indians who have been attempting to rob India of its essential character, to hollow it out from within. Nandan believes that this sudden spurt of communalism and chaos will also pass, as so many such upheavals have passed before it, and that India will restore its soul and its harmony, as it always has. As he writes: "fortunately for India, she has always had the profound capacity for self-renewal either through her individuals or their movements. It is after all the birth place of half a dozen of the world's great religions including Hinduism, the oldest, and Buddhism, the most rational, compassionate. And, as far as human beings go, I cannot think of a greater person than Mahatma Gandhi" (Requiem 155).

Nandan avers that India has a long history of self-introspection and self-awareness, and extols its remarkable capacity for self-renewal. He claims that India has an inbuilt system, a kind of civilisational immune response, that fights all evils and restores stability every time it gets corrupted or destabilised. Every time India faces a profound threat to its being, there arrives a leader – a Budha, an Ashoka, an Akbar, a Gandhi – who rebuilds its soul and reestablishes Dharma, restoring to India what those who act against its essential character have tried to take from it.To Nandan, India is an idea with a global vision, an idea that is exclusively all-inclusive; an idea that believes in Vasudeva Kutumbakam, the world is one family; an idea that spreads love, tolerance, sympathy, and universal brotherhood; an idea that, as Raja Rao claims, makes an Indian, and not the other way round. It is the idea that precedes and exceeds the individual, the community, and even the nation-state that claims to contain it. Therefore, Nandan vehemently enunciates that "even Hindu Indians cannot destroy that part of India, so resilient and accepting like the sea, and extending beyond the borders of a modern nation. India is larger than all the Indians put together" (154).

Conclusion

The India that Nandan recollects and reminisces about in his autobiography and political memoirs, the idea of India and Indianness as explicated in his writings, the one that he claims

to have discovered through his sympathetically intense readings of India, its culture, its traditions, and its thought, reaffirms and restores that spirit which is embedded in ancient Indian philosophical tracts and literature. To many, this spiritual India may appear to be a fragment of an ancient India, a frozen, unchanged, and unmoved India, as Vijay Mishra might characterise it, the India from which the ancestors of the ‘old’ diaspora had migrated to various plantation islands, an India that, as Naipaul suggests, was “an old and perhaps an ancient India” untouched by the “great reform movements of the nineteenth century” (“Foreword” 13). It may further appear that the India Nandan primarily inhabits and celebrates is a spiritual India, an India that is, in a sense, entirely oblivious to its own political and social realities, an India of the inner life rather than the rise and fall of political regimes. This impression is made all the more striking, and all the more paradoxical, when one considers the historical moment of Nandan's arrival and sojourn in India. Young Nandan arrived in India just as the Nehruvian era was drawing to a close, and he lived there for the better part of seven years, a period during which the cracks in Indian politics and democracy had begun to appear with increasing visibility, a period of gathering crisis that would eventually culminate in the Emergency. This was, by any reckoning, perhaps the most tumultuous and turbulent period of post-independence Indian politics. And yet, paradoxically, when Nandan recounts his years in India in his autobiography and political memoirs, there is no mention of this political upheaval, no engagement with the crisis that was building around him, no reflection on the fractures that were beginning to show in the democratic fabric of the nation he was so intensely reading and absorbing. The political storm that was gathering outside his window leaves no trace in the India he constructs and inhabits in his writing.

On the surface, the absence of the political life of India in Nandan's autobiography and memoirs may appear as a major gap, a flaw, even, in his writings. But as stated earlier, every reading is also a misreading, which in turn suggests that no reading can ever be a complete reading, it is always, necessarily, a partial reading. What appears to be a gap or a flaw may, in fact, be a conscious choice on Nandan's part. It is therefore important that, rather than making conclusive statements about what he has not recounted, a sincere and serious effort be made to understand what image and idea of India he foregrounds, why he foregrounds it, from what position of enunciation, through what philosophical lens; and if he does this consciously, what his intent and its politics are, and what it is that he seeks to establish. If analysed and interrogated sympathetically, we will be able to find answers to these questions, unearth his real intent, and

understand both Nandan and his India more fully and more honestly. The first noticeable point is that autobiography as a form grants the writer the freedom to identify and narrate precisely those sections and portions of his life that he deems most significant, those that will help him explore and reconstruct his own self. A second, equally important point is to understand that his reflections and recollections of India, as recounted and recorded in his autobiography, are not spontaneous emotional outbursts, nor were they written in the immediate aftermath of his departure from India, they are, rather, intensely meditative reflections written almost three decades later, shaped by the long slow work of memory, distance, and accumulated understanding.

It is also necessary to point out that Nandan wrote his autobiography and memoirs while he was in exile, banished from his homeland, Fiji. And why was he, along with so many other fellow Indo-Fijians, banished? His banishment was largely driven by his being Indian, by an identity that, in the eyes of native Fijians, made him merely a vulagi, an outsider, one who did not truly belong. The pain of losing his home and homeland, a loss driven primarily by his Indian identity and history, must have generated in him that irresistible urge to reflect upon India and Indianness, which had always been an inseparable constituent part of his self. It is for this reason that the India he foregrounds is neither frozen nor fossilised, it is, rather, an eternal India, one that continues to live and to define Indians across the globe, wherever they have been carried by the tides of history. It is for this reason that the idea of India and the meanings of Indianness that Nandan propounds and foregrounds in his autobiography serve a larger argumentative purpose, they help him refute and reject all those arguments that native Fijians deploy to justify the expulsion of Indo-Fijians from Fiji. Nandan perhaps recounts the history of the Indian diaspora precisely in order to demonstrate that there is no evidence in history of Indians ever being aggressive or imperialist in their migrations and settlements. He claims that the overseas Indian is not a new phenomenon, India has a long history of migration and of engaging with the world beyond its borders. "Indians," claims Nandan, "have travelled, settled and helped create new countries and new civilizations for centuries", and they never carried expansionist intent or tendencies as the motive for their migration (Fiji 69).

Nandan argues that history has no record of Indians conquering other countries or peoples through the sword, and states that there is not a single example in which "Indians have attempted to decimate or dispossess a native people" (Fiji 68). On the contrary, history offers

ample proof of Indians crossing borders to spread spiritual values, tolerance, love, and brotherhood, rather than to extend dominion or extract wealth. Instead of competition, avarice, and violence, Indians have disseminated cooperation, sacrifice, and non-violence across the world. But ironically, avers Nandan, Indians are often envied or pilloried, not for their vices but for the very virtues they carry. Fiji, claims Nandan, is the most recent example of this prejudice and injustice that Indians have had to face. Despite having worked tirelessly and faithfully for the development of Fiji for almost a century, even having, by Nandan's account, saved Fijians from dispossession, Indians were feared and treated as outsiders. And yet it is an established fact, Nandan writes, that wherever Indians migrated, they worked in coordination with the native people for the enrichment of the host culture. They humanised the land, tilled the soil, and put food on the table (Lamming 47), a truth that applies above all to the old diaspora of Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, and South Africa. Even the new diaspora of the USA, the UK, Australia, and Canada has tremendously enriched its host countries, contributing not just labour and commerce but culture, knowledge, and civic life. Nandan considers the Indian diaspora, taken in its entirety, as the finest and most enduring ambassador of India in the world. Thus, by not foregrounding the political life of India, the India that Nandan chooses to foreground carries its own political relevance, and makes an important political statement, particularly within the Fijian political context. Nandan seems to want to suggest and assert that the apprehensions surrounding Indians are entirely unfounded, that Indians are not rivals but fellow citizens, that their commitment to Fiji and its people is beyond suspicion, and that the Indianness they bring with them will help build a better, more egalitarian, and genuinely multicultural Fiji.

The absence of Indian political life in Nandan's writings can also be understood as part of the intellectual influence of figures like Gandhi and Tagore, whose perspectives may have shaped his approach to India in fundamental ways. For them, history is not about the rise and fall of empires, those nightmarish accounts of assault and counter-assault do not offer even a glimpse of the real India. The task of the chronicler, in this understanding, is to look beyond these tumultuous and turbulent events and to represent instead the people and their spirit, "the flow of life and death and of happiness and sorrow that moves on in the countless village-homes" (Tagore Vision of History 25). It is not that Nandan may not have noticed the political war-games being played around the time he lived in India, undoubtedly he would have observed every political twist and turn with keen and informed interest, but the reason for not recording

or recounting those events in his autobiography and memoirs was perhaps a deeper and more deliberate one: to search for the essence of India, that soul-force which not only defines India but also inspires and guides Indians living not just in India but across the globe, wherever history has dispersed them. Thus, Nandan's writings foreground how and why Indo-Fijians remain so intently and intensely attached to their India and their Indianness, to the myths, histories, and stories of their ancestral land. This attachment, Nandan asserts, is not merely sentimental or nostalgic. It is necessary, necessary to awaken a much-needed political and cultural consciousness among Indo-Fijians: a consciousness that would not only inspire them to carry and spread the values of love, tolerance, and brotherhood beyond the borders of India, but would also enable them to resist their victimisation, to refuse the identity of the outsider that has been imposed upon them, and to claim, with confidence and dignity, their rightful place in the land that their ancestors seeded, nurtured, and made home.

Notes and References:

See, Vijay Mishra, for conceptualization of the old and the new disaporas and how they differ from each other

See, for instance, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures (1989) for detailed examination of the writings of post-colonial writings as specimens of 'writing back' to the empire. Interestingly, title of the book alludes to one of Rushdie's essays, "The Empire Strikes Back with a Vengeance," published in The Times on July 3, 1982, in which he argues that literature plays a crucial role in resisting the Empire. Extending Rushdie's argument, and grounding it in more systematic theoretical and conceptual framework through a detailed study of literature produced by postcolonial writers, Ashcroft and others establish how these writers are "writing back" to the Empire by subverting and resisting its dominance and hegemony.

Girmit is a Bhojpuri distortion of the English word "agreement", the indenture contract that bound Indian labourers to work on British plantation colonies across the Atlantic and the Pacific for a stipulated period, and those who were shipped under this contract came to be known as Girmitiyas, a term that carries within it the entire weight of displacement, coercion, and survival that defined their experience. For the history and theoretical accounts of girmit and girmitiya, see Brij V. Lal, Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians (Journal of Pacific History, 1983); Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century (University of Hawaii Press, 1992); and Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji (Australian National University, 2000); Vijay Mishra, The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorising the Diasporic Imaginary (Routledge, 2007); and Sudesh Mishra, "The Time is Out of Joint," SPAN 52 (2002); and "Time and Girmit," Social Text 82 (2005).

Naipaul visits India, the land of his ancestors, in the early 1960s and travels across the country trying to discover India and understand its people. The impressions that India left on the young diasporic discoverer are recorded in his first book on India, An Area of Darkness (1964), which is widely regarded as a dark and pessimistic account of India and Indians.

See Sri Aurobindo's The Foundations of Indian Culture (1959) that critiques the readings of western critics and their approach to represent and interpret India, he identified three critical positions through India has been approached, the hostile, the dispassionate rationalist, and the sympathetic

See Partha Chatterji's "Whose Imagined Community" The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories. Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 3–13, wherein he argues that nationalist movement in India divided its culture into two domains – the material and the spiritual. The material domain was necessarily open to Western influence and borrowing, the spiritual domain, however, was claimed as an exclusively indigenous preserve, kept deliberately apart from Western encroachment. The deeper the dependence on the West in the material domain, the more fiercely exclusive and inviolable the spiritual domain became: as if the two were in a compensatory relationship, the loss of ground in one necessitating the strengthening of the other.

See, Vijay Mishra, The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorising the Diasporic Imaginary. Routledge, 2007.

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