The Literature of the Indian Diaspora
Theorizing the diasporic imaginary

*The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the diasporic imaginary* constitutes a major study of the literature and other cultural texts of the Indian diaspora. It is also an important contribution to diaspora theory in general. Examining both the ‘old’ Indian diaspora of early capitalism, following the abolition of slavery, and the ‘new’ diaspora linked to movements of late capital, Vijay Mishra argues that a full understanding of the Indian diaspora can only be achieved if attention is paid to the particular locations of both the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ in nation-states.

Applying a theoretical framework based on trauma, mourning/impossible mourning, spectres, identity, travel, translation, and recognition, Mishra uses the term ‘imaginary’ to refer to any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously or unconsciously, as a group in displacement. He examines the works of key writers, many now based across the globe in Canada, Australia, America and the UK – among them V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, M. G. Vassanji, Shani Mootoo, Bharati Mukherjee, David Dabydeen, Rohinton Mistry and Hanif Kureishi – to show how they exemplify both the diasporic imaginary and the respective traumas of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ Indian diasporas.

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The Literature of the Indian Diaspora
Theorizing the diasporic imaginary

Vijay Mishra
For my wife Nalini
another gift of scholarship
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tāpas beṣa bisesī udāṣi
caūdāhā barisā rāmu banabāṣī
tulṣidās, rāmācaritāmānas II.29

Bereft of goods, as mendicant, as slave
Rama to spend fourteen years in the woods

afraid to leave the familiar temporariness

V. S. Naipaul, A House for Mr Biswas 174

we hide our secret identities beneath the false skin of those identities

Salman Rushdie, The Ground Beneath Her Feet 73
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The spectre of Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul stalks this book throughout, and I must begin by acknowledging my indebtedness to his works. Without Naipaul there is no centre to this book. Gratitude to him also necessitates thanking many others, some who have read Naipaul in ways similar to me; others who have given me the necessary analytical skills; and others still who have been part of the central theoretical problematic of the book, the theme of the diasporic imaginary. The names mentioned are uncharacteristically many for an acknowledgement, but this is so because the book itself is all about memory and creative recollection in which a critical discourse of objectivity meets a personal discourse of subjective interpretation and reminiscence. At that point of meeting, of conjunction, names are pivotal. I therefore begin with the names of people who have read the archive in ways similar to me. They are: Hirday Mishra, Sachi Reddy, Krishna Datt, Som Prakash, Subramani, Satendra Nandan, Sudesh Mishra, Brij Lal, Raymond Pillai, the late D. K. Sharma, Fiji Indians all. Postcolonial and diaspora theorists come next. Among them I wish to mention: Khachig Tölöyan, Jim Clifford, R. Radhakrishnan, Harish Trivedi, Sneja Gunew, Chris Connery, David McInerney, Iain Chambers, John O’Carroll, Stephen Slemon, Bob Hodge, Gareth Griffiths, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Debjani Ganguly, Jon Stratton, Nasrin Rahimieh, Deepika Bahri, Nandi Bhatia, Ien Ang and Terry Goldie. I pause to thank again Stephen Slemon, gentle friend and humane Canadian, for the two years I spent at the University of Alberta and for his subtle reminders that the book had to be completed.

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I owe a special debt to a close friend of my undergraduate years at Victoria University of Wellington, the late Boyd Anderson, from whom I learned how to write accomplished English prose. I regret so much that Boyd died so young and so very tragically. I wish to thank Frank and Rhonda Edwards, Juliet Oddie and Aye Nu, kindred spirits and rare souls, for keeping alive the importance of memory in our lives.

This book begins and ends with references to a heritage that has been referred to as the indenture girmit experience. I have carried memories of that experience, thanks to my late father and mother, my brother Hirday and my sister Shiro. Although removed from that experience, my children Rohan and Paras have not been unaware of their father’s working-class indenture heritage and have sensitively engaged with it. For our granddaughters, Anjali and Tara, diaspora as read here would be a matter of archive fever only. For our daughter-in-law Kylie it will be a similar matter of understanding another history. The book is dedicated to my wife Nalini, herself part of the diaspora, but always careful not to become too
sentimental about it. She has valued the work of the mind and has unfailingly provided me with the necessary stimulus for scholarship.

Before my father died in 1989, he reminded me about a promise I made to him many years before. I confessed again that I was not a creative writer because I had no capacity for metaphor but, as promised, I would make up for this lack through scholarship as intellectual autobiography. I said I would write a book on Australian literature because finally I had made Australia home; I would write a book on an aspect of English literary history because this was my discipline; I said I’d work around religious texts that I remembered from childhood and construct a devotional poetics; I said I would write about films, Indian films, that created India for us in the diaspora. Finally, I said I’d write something about our own lives, about diaspora. This book completes the promise made then. The promise could be made and executed because, with all his limitations, my father (basically a self-taught man still struggling to get out of the detritus of indenture) valued education and the place of the intellect in our lives.

My mother died a few months after I had completed writing the longer version of this book. She, too, was part of indenture life, married young at 16 and part of a family of eight sisters and two brothers, not unlike the Tulsi family in Naipaul’s great novel. I left Fiji when she was barely 40, but when she died years later in Sydney, although I had seen her often enough, I never managed to say a final goodbye. This is a deep regret, for I missed my chance to talk, finally, with the only person who would have understood the deep anxiety about loss that pervades this book. Like my father, she, too, had hoped to die in Fiji, her homeland, but she didn’t. After her funeral rites, I entered her room and found that she had left behind a red exercise book. It was a book written in the hand of a young child beginning his first year in school. The book had numbers and alphabet, simple arithmetic, simple sentences in English and Hindi, and a few facts about the world. It was my first book at school, and she had preserved it all these years. I held that book in my hands, and that’s when tears fell. To her that book was more valuable than anything else.

Many years later I write another book, and this book is also as much about myself as about the works of writers of the Indian diaspora. But it is a limited book in its scope. It is not an exhaustive account of the literature of the Indian diaspora and it is certainly not encyclopaedic. Large swathes of the bibliography are missing from the study, and many writers are treated too lightly, perhaps even dismissively. I regret these gestures which became necessary once the project became more concerned with an understanding of the theoretical underpinning of the diasporic experience than with comprehensive critical commentaries on books written by the diaspora. Although the archive, in however truncated a form, is primarily Indian diaspora, and has a strong Fiji Indian bias, the theoretical apparatus has a much broader application, especially for people who are moved by the words with which the Bollywood film Veer-Zaara (2004) ends: ghar cale (‘let’s go home’). The Fijian narrative may require slight adjustments in the light of the December 5, 2006 military coup led by Commodore Voreque (Frank) Bainimarama. Although his motives
remain murky – a combination of personality clash between a prime minis-
ter and his military commander, complicated by the traumatic aftermath of
a mutiny within the army in the wake of the 2000 George Speight-led coup
against Mahendra Chaudhry’s Labour government – what is clear is a resur-
gence of tribal power struggle in the Fijian establishment once the Fiji Indian
had been effectively neutralized. It is for these reasons that there is, as I write,
no clearly defined objective of the Bainimarama coup nor a predictable end-
game scenario in spite of the Commodore’s claim that his coup is no more than
an exercise in establishing ‘responsible and accountable governance’.

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Vijay Mishra
Santa Cruz–Edmonton–Perth
Prologue: ‘That time is past’

Many years ago – in 1966, to be precise – I was asked by my English tutor at Victoria University of Wellington (one Mr Wright, if I recall correctly) to explain references to an ancient Indian text in Matthew Arnold’s poems ‘Resignation’ (1843–8) and ‘The World and the Quietist’ (1848). The tutor presumed that I had some cultural understanding, some familiarity with the language, and could, for once, make an unusual contribution to English tutorials in which I had been largely a silent participant. I suspect this was because, in the days before theory reached the antipodes, readings of texts were often bland exercises in critical evaluation. The latter required, after F. R. Leavis, a sensibility peculiarly English, of which, in those early years, I wasn’t a part. The request caught me unawares. I was literally stumped; I simply didn’t know. I told the class that I’d check my facts and return with an answer in the next tutorial. That afternoon I took the cable car down to Lambton Quay to purchase two books from Whitcombe & Tombes (now Whitcoulls), New Zealand’s best-known bookseller. My weekly scholarship allowance was £7 (US$13), and the books I bought – *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* edited by Kenneth Allott (London: Longmans, 1965) and *The Bhagavadgītā* translated by S. Radhakrishnan (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963) – cost me £1.18.0 ($3.50) and £1.4.6 ($2.30) respectively. In other words, I spent almost half my weekly scholarship allowance to purchase these books. There were reasons for this. My University Arnold selection was a basic student text; and, as for the *Bhagavadgītā*, although I carried a pocket edition of the *Bhagavadgītā* (in Sanskrit), it was more like a good-luck charm given to me by my mother when I left for New Zealand in February 1964. And since I didn’t read Sanskrit then (I learned it many years later) the *Bhagavadgītā* existed for me simply as a Hindu religious text known to me through only one verse which I had learned by rote. The verse – ‘yadā yadā hi dharmaṁ śṛṇu’ – promised the return of Krishna whenever dharma, or the eternal law, was threatened by evil forces.

I can’t recall much of what I said in the next tutorial a week later. But since I have the books I bought some 40 years ago with me as I write this prologue I can at least attempt to re-create my points of entry, however imprecisely or inelegantly. In the notes to ‘Resignation’ Kenneth Allott made the connection between the poet’s detachment (‘The poet,
Prologue

to whose mighty heart / Heaven doth a quicker pulse impart’) and the Bhagavadgītā with reference to the poet’s ability to ‘admire uncravingly’. Allott glosses ‘uncravingly’ as follows: ‘Like an Indian sage the poet mixes with mankind but is emotionally detached from its concerns. Cp. Arnold’s letter to [Arthur Hugh] Clough 4 March 1848 (The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough [CL] 1932: 71), “The Indians distinguish between … abandoning practice, and abandoning the fruits of action and all respect thereto. This last is a supreme step, and dilated on throughout the Poem.”’ Allott then gives a typical instance from Bhagavadgītā 6.9–10. I give the passage as it appears in the Radhakrishnan translation: ‘He who is equal-minded among friends, companions and foes, among those who are neutral and impartial, among those who are hateful and related, among saints and sinners, he excels. [Let him] try constantly to concentrate his mind (on the Supreme Self) remaining in solitude and alone, self-controlled, free from desires and (longing for) possessions’. Arnold’s own encounter with the Bhagavadgītā came via a curious route. He read an account of the text in V. Cousin’s reading of the poem (in French) in 1845 from which he also gathered that Wilhelm von Humboldt had composed an influential analysis of the poem in two lectures (1826). The latter immediately occasioned G. W. F. Hegel’s less than complimentary review of them published in 1827. It is unlikely that Arnold actually read Humboldt’s lectures or Hegel’s review. He did, however, read (in 1847 or early 1848) G. Lassen’s Latin translation of the Bhagavadgītā (Bonn, 1846), ‘a corrected version of A. W. Schlegel’s Latin rendering of 1823’.

As Allott informs us, Clough was not impressed by Arnold’s mystical claptrap. Arnold wrote to Clough in March 1848 (?): ‘I am disappointed the Oriental wisdom pleased you not’ (CL 69). Later Clough was to censure Arnold’s Indian ‘quietism’ in a review of Arnold’s poems (July 1853): ‘… for the present age, the lessons of reflectiveness and caution do not appear to be more needful than … calls to action … the dismal cycle of his rehabilitated Hindoo-Greek philosophy …’. In response to Clough’s misgivings Arnold wrote a poem, ‘The World and the Quietist’, specifically for ‘Critias’ (Clough). The opening lines of the poem are given to Critias:

_Why, when the world’s great mind_  
_Hath finally inclin’d,_  
_Why, you say, Critias, be debating still?_  
_Why, with these mournful rhymes_  
_Learn’d in more languid climes,_  
_Blame our activity_  
_Who, with such passionate will,_  
_Are, what we mean to be?_

Glossing lines 4–5, Allott writes: ‘The mental detachment, i.e. freedom from the world’s “passionate will”, which Krishna preaches to Arjuna (while urging him to act) supplies one element of A[rnold]’s conception of the poet’s contemplative
role in “Resignation”.’ In the end, though, Arnold is more Greek than Hindu, more comfortable with the figure of Sophocles, to whose mind an earlier ‘Dover Beach’ (the Aegean) brought ‘the turbid ebb and flow/Of human misery’, than with a Krishna emphasizing that even the renouncer acts.

I cannot recall or re-create what more I would have said in the tutorial – certainly a few words on ‘Learn’d in more languid climes’ which undercuts the message of the Bhagavadgītā by emphasizing its pastness (playing on the meanings of ‘learn’d’) and its slackness (the meanings of ‘languid’) but perhaps also a reading of the well-known one-verse manifesto (Bhagavadgītā 2.47) ‘karmaṇi eva adhikāras te/mā phalēṣu kadācana’ (‘Your entitlement is only to the act, never to its fruits’) as well as a word or two on Culture and Anarchy. Nor can I remember whether there was any occasion to reflect on my own encounter with the texts of Indian high culture. After all, I belonged to a people still recovering from the detritus of indenture, still trying to find a proper language because our own was like an anti-language, a demotic created to survive and known only to those who had been part of Fiji Indian plantation history. Arnold was alien to me, but so was the Bhagavadgītā. We did not know its metaphysical resonance (beyond its place in our own reading of Hinduism as affirming the comforts of a tribal religion) and certainly we did not know the austere demands it made on our need for salvation. In the ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’ (1852–5) Arnold had written: ‘Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born.’ This was more like our lives as we, too, hovered between two worlds, our own, which even then seemed dead, and another, of the diaspora, not quite capable of being born in a world where the cultural logic of assimilation was the norm. And because my commentary on Arnold had to be framed in the discourse of English literary criticism (‘detachment’, ‘quietism’, ‘resignation’, ‘cycle’, and so on were the key words) the matter of declaring difference, of affirming a new knowledge and making the Bhagavadgītā itself the centre of critical knowledge (above and beyond Arnold) never arose.

Then – all those years ago – I read the Bhagavadgītā as a footnote to Arnold, not as a text in its own right. In composing a commentary I read whatever was relevant to literary criticism, not how the text may have affected me. The fact that it did is beyond question; but that I cannot recall how it did is testimony to the degree to which non-Western knowledge was seen to possess only instrumental, footnote value. There was no place for a radical rethinking of the (Western) past, no critical disavowal of it, no proper hatred of it (after Adorno). Matthew Arnold was what he was; the Bhagavadgītā simply happened to supply him with additional ideas as creative icing on an already strong preoccupation with the links between culture and poetry.

Years on, I write again with a different freedom; much of it should be evident in this book on the literature of the Indian diaspora. But the newfound assertiveness and critical certitude cannot be totally divorced from first encounters. For me the moment of the Arnold–Bhagavadgītā commentary was decisive even if in my commentary I simply re-confirmed the hierarchy of the two texts. I end by correcting
a loss, or the failure to address the impact of the text on me. I no longer read the 
Bhagavadgītā as the eighteen-chapter relatively autonomous text that just hap-
pens to be embedded in the great Sanskrit epic the Mahābhārata. I now read 
the ‘Bhagavadgītā-in-the-Mahābhārata’, a work that grows out of the concerns 
of the larger epic, a work that tries to transform this maddening epic into a 
metaphysic, into a theory of epic action (where all heroes are failures and die 
needlessly). But it cannot win; it cannot transform lived human behaviour into 
a metaphysic, and its offer of salvation through a redefinition of what it is to act, 
and who finally acts, does not redeem the epic which, in the end, affirms not 
Krishna’s directive that action should be removed from the world of prakṛti, of 
phenomena, and based on complete understanding (of the puruṣa/brahman), 
but Arjuna’s fear that action, even of the detached, selfless variety has the same 
consequence: the destruction of humankind. The scene at the end of the epic 
is bare, harsh, meaningless, severe: a man and a dog ascend the steep slopes of 
a mountain only to find their brethren in worlds to which they do not belong, 
only to find that the rhymes were indeed ‘mournful’.

I have read the Bhagavadgītā many times, in the original Sanskrit and in most 
English translations. I read it again while writing this prologue and I read it, as 
force of habit now dictates, as verses embedded in the great epic. The poem 
ends, the great matters of the epic must continue since the decision to fight 
has been made. Arjuna has been persuaded by Krishna, although in the con-
text of the epic’s own diegesis, even before the dialogue between Krishna and 
Arjuna, the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra has been informed that the battle nears 
its end as the great Bhishma is dead. But in terms of linear time Arjuna’s elder 
brother, Yuddhisthīra, must now inform the elders of the opposing side of his 
itention. Furthermore, as custom demands (as these elders are also his grand-
uncles and teachers), he must seek their permission to fight. Yuddhisthīra is the 
eldest of the five Pandava brothers forced to fight to regain what is legitimately 
theirs. He comes into the epic, though, as the son of Dharma, of the law itself, 
and is referred to as the Lawgiver or the Lord of the Law. Upholding the law 
is the message of the epic; when heroes die, the law itself becomes topsy-turvy, 
and social dissension and disorder follow. So the request to fight is also part of 
the law, a duty, and who better to fulfil this duty than the person who stands 
for the law, Yuddhisthīra. He approaches his grand-uncle Bhishma and gets his 
permission to fight. He also receives from him information about how he can 
be killed, for if he isn’t the battle cannot be won. Bhishma foretells his death 
but declares that the moment will be of his own choosing. Then Yuddhisthīra 
approaches Drona, the great archer and his teacher. Again he seeks his per-
mission to fight and information about how he can be killed. Great archer 
that he is, he cannot be killed, but he declares that if the moral order becomes 
cankerous, then there is no point for him to live. ‘How could that be?’ asks 
Yuddhisthīra. Drona replies, in those grand lapidary lines:

śastraṁ cāham raṇe jahyāṁ śrutvā sumahad aprīyam 
śraddhāyākyāt puruṣād etat satyaṁ bravīmi te
And I swear to you, I shall lay down my weapons only when I have heard a great untruth from a man whose word I trust.

And Drona does put down his arms, and prepares to die only when he is falsely informed by Yuddhisthira, the lawgiver, the upholder of truth, that his son Asватhāman is dead. I am moved whenever I read these lines; no other lines from the Mahābhārata (including of course the Bhagavadgītā) move me as much. This kind of aesthetic judgement was not available to me in 1966 and, even if it were, it would have required a disavowal of a mode of literary analysis and reading, a ‘hating’ (after Adorno) of the hierarchy of text and commentary, for which I was ill-equipped. Just emerging from the constraints of a colonial education and essentially peasant upbringing, I had no cultural or intellectual resource with which to make a counter-claim. To do so would have required a different engagement with modernity, which I undertake in the ensuing pages with reference to a literary corpus written in ‘less languid climes’.
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Introduction: The diasporic imaginary

There needs no ghost … come from the grave
To tell us this.

_Hamlet_ I. v. 131–2

All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by spectres, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements. Diasporas are both celebrated (by late/postmodernity) and maligned (by early modernity). But we need to be a little cautious, a little wary of either position. Celebrating diasporas as the exemplary condition of late modernity – diasporas as highly democratic communities for whom domination and territoriality are not the preconditions of ‘nationhood’ – is a not uncommon refrain. In the late-modern celebratory argument on behalf of diasporas, diasporic communities are said to occupy a border zone where the most vibrant kinds of interaction take place, and where ethnicity and nation are kept separate. In this argument, diasporas are fluid, ideal social formations happy to live wherever there is an international airport and stand for a longer, much admired historical process. The tension between this position and the earlier modern, reactionary reading is evident in a classic Hollywood film, _Casablanca_ (1942). In it, as Catherine Portuges has pointed out, the opening sequence presents the spectator with ‘polyglot crowds of hopeful refugees awaiting the miracle of an exit visa to a better world’ (50). Placed against Hollywood’s own tendency to produce a cultural product that is homogeneous and unproblematically ‘American’, the ‘irreducible particularity of their [the characters’] ethnic and regional voices’ (53) suggests that Michael Curtiz, the film’s director and himself a Hungarian émigré, was introducing a discrepant diasporic narrative, a discordant, dialogic eruption, into the film as a statement about diasporic labour in the formation of Hollywood filmic practice and about alternative, unhappy, irreconcilable narratives embedded in voices that _Casablanca_ dare not interrogate. After all, it is in _Casablanca_ that Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), when asked about his nationality, replies, without any ironic intent: ‘I’m a drunkard.’
The narrative of *Casablanca* posits escape to liberty as the universal ideal even if the ideology is encased in a mushy romance. Ideology, by virtue of its connection with the aesthetics of romance (which is how the film *Casablanca* has been popularly received), deflects a fundamental aspect of diaspora: its irreducible complexity at the level of lived social and political expression. The point, hidden from the film’s diegesis, is that diasporas have a progressivist as well as a reactionary streak in them. Both forms of this ‘streak’ centre on the idea of one’s ‘home land’ as very real spaces from which alone a certain level of redemption is possible. Homeland is the *desh* (in Hindi) against which all the other lands are foreign, or *videsh*; it is the source of homesickness, that which ‘gives rise to the adventures through which subjectivity (whose fundamental history is presented in the Odyssey) escapes from the prehistoric world’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 78). When not available in any ‘real’ sense, homeland exists as an absence that acquires surplus meaning by the *fact* of diaspora, so that Sikhs in Vancouver and Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto clamour for a homeland (Khalistan, Tamil Eelam) or, in some quarters, Muslims seek a pan-Islamic utopia in the European heartland. It is not unusual for the two versions (the physical and the mental) to be collapsed into an ahistorical past going back to antiquity. We need to make an important qualification, though. This reading of the homeland must be placed alongside another truth about diasporas: as a general rule – and the establishment of a Jewish homeland is the exception and not the rule – diasporas do not return to their homeland (real or imagined). Throughout the dark years of South African apartheid few Indians (the Mahatma is the notable exception) returned to India; nor have Fiji Indians, in spite of recent troubles there.

The generalist argument, however inelegantly presented above, acts as a template for a quite specific archive. To get my narrative right, to be able to say things about diasporas as exemplary as well as reactionary sites of late modernity, I want to home in on the 12-million-strong Indian diaspora – in the history of migration a comparatively recent phenomenon, although it may be argued that the modern Indian diaspora has a longer history which is in fact contiguous with an older wanderlust, the *ghummakar* tradition, that took the gypsies to the Middle East and to Europe, fellow Indians to South-East Asia and Sri Lanka as missionaries and conquerors, and traders to the littoral trading community around the Arabian Sea.1 Rethinking the argument that ‘it was poverty at home that pushed them [Indians] across the ocean [to Africa]’, M. G. Vassanji writes in his recent novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* ‘but surely there’s that wanderlust first, that itch in the sole, that hankering in the soul that puffs out the sails for journey into the totally unknown?’ (2004: 17). This Indian diaspora (excluding the Tamils of Sri Lanka) is a complex social formation, in fact an extraordinarily rich archive, which, in Ranjana Khanna’s words (after Derrida) is ‘both collective memory and the origin of memory’ (Khanna 2003: 271).

To explore the narrative of the Indian diaspora critically, we may want to read it as two relatively autonomous archives designated by the terms ‘old’ and ‘new’. The old (that is, early modern, classic capitalist or, more specifically,
nineteenth-century indenture) and the new (that is, late modern or late capital-
list) traverse two quite different kinds of topography. The subjects of the old
(‘before the world was thoroughly consolidated as transnational’ [Spivak 1996:
245]) occupy spaces in which they interact by and large with other colonized
peoples with whom they have a complex relationship of power and privilege
as in Fiji, South Africa, Malaysia, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam;
the subjects of the new are people who have entered metropolitan centres of
Empire or other white settler countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand
and the USA as part of a post-1960s pattern of global migration. The cultural
dynamics of the latter are often examined within a multicultural theory. There
are, of course, Indians, part-comprador, part-indenture, with long histories in
many parts of Africa, notably East Africa, whose life-worlds have been the sub-
ject of some very fine writing by the twice-displaced Indian-Canadian writer M.
G. Vassanji. As is clear from Vassanji’s treatment of ‘Shamsi’ traders of Gujarat
who migrated to East Africa, the binary of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ offered here
is not meant to isolate communities or to situate experiences within non-nego-
tiable or exclusive frames. It should be self-evident that the ‘old’ has become
part of the ‘new’ through re-migrations such as Fiji-Indians to Vancouver or
Trinidad-Indians to Toronto (one thinks of the transnational life of Ms
Neela Mahendra of Lilliput-Blefuscu, the unhappy South Pacific isles inhab-
ited by the Indo-Lilly in Salman Rushdie’s novel Fury) and that the old has not
been immune to a general electronic media culture that has tended to redefine
subjectivities along different lines of what Manuel Castells (1996) has termed
the ‘net and the self’. I keep the distinction of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ not
because the binary has to be defended or that the binary is incontestable; it is
made because Indian intellectuals of the diaspora (Appadurai, Radhakrishnan
and Bhabha, among many others) presume that the lives of the Indian NRIs
(the ‘new’ diaspora of ‘non-resident Indians’) constitute the self-evidently legit-
imate archive with which to explore histories of diasporic subjectivities. They
have also tended to presume that the ‘new’ presents itself as the dominant (and
indeed the more exciting) site for purposes of diasporic comment. The binary
therefore has a strategic function: it recognizes an earlier phase of migration,
the psychic imaginary of which involved a reading of India based on a journey
that was complete, a journey that was final.

The ‘old’ and the ‘new’ Indian diasporas (as I have called them) reflect
the very different historical conditions that produced them. The distinction
between the old and the new becomes clearer when we note that the ‘new’
surfaces precisely at the moment of (post)modern ascendency; it comes with
globalization and hypermobility, it comes with modern means of communica-
tion already fully formed or in the making (airplanes, telephone, e-mail, the
internet, videocassettes, DVD, video-link, webcam) and it comes, since 2003,
with the gift of dual citizenship from India (the Indian Citizenship Act 1955
has been amended to allow the Indian diaspora in the United Kingdom, the
United States, Canada, Australia, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands and Italy to
retain dual citizenship). In a thoroughly global world the act of displacement
now makes diasporic subjects travellers on the move, their homeland contained in the simulacral world of visual media where the ‘net’ constitutes the ‘self’ and quite unlike the earlier diaspora where imagination was triggered by the contents in gunny sacks: a Ganesha icon, a dog-eared copy of the *Rāmāyana* or the *Qurʾān*, an old sari or other deshi outfit, a photograph of a pilgrimage, and so on. Indeed, ‘homeland’ is now available in the confines of one’s bedroom in Vancouver, Sacramento or Perth. In short, networking now takes over from the imaginary. Presented in this fashion, this is a great, positive yarn about extremely flexible human beings. But even within the ‘new’ diaspora this version is only part of the story. The Afghan refugee to Australia or the Fiji-Indian who is illegally ensconced in Vancouver is neither global nor (hyper)mobile. Her condition, unlike those of the upwardly mobile professionals in Silicon Valley, is not unlike those of people under indenture, for she has to work in sweatshops during graveyard shifts or, as in the case of the illegal, cannot leave Vancouver as she has no access to a passport. It is this complex diaspora story that I would want to tell with some of the privileges of the critical and self-reflexive native informant. But it is a story that is also a critique of an uneasy postmodern trend towards collapsing diasporic (and historical) differences.

An anecdote comes to mind here, an anecdote centred upon a question asked on my third journey to India in October 1994. The question was posed in Bombay, emblematic city, after Benjamin, of ‘marginal types such as the collector, gambler, prostitute, and flâneur’ (Patke 2000: 12). In this city of cynics and slum-dwelling cinema buffs people’s questions are not what they seem. So when the porter of the Bombay Radio Club (where once colonials came to listen to the BBC World Service over a chota peg) welcomed me with ‘Where are you coming from?’ I prepared myself for an ironic response. But I need not have worried; Indians do not have a sense of irony. The porter’s question was no more than the Indian introduction, the Indian way of opening up a social space. I remembered an early V. S. Naipaul essay in which he recounts also being asked ‘Where do you come from?’ ‘It is the Indian question … [of] people who think in terms of the village, the district, the province, the community, the caste,’ Naipaul had added (1972: 43). I explained to the porter at the Radio Club my history, my origin in the sugar plantations of Fiji, the fact that though a Brahmin (my surname would have given that away) I was basically working class, and had my forebears not left the Indo-Gangetic Plains in the nineteenth century I would probably be illiterate and begging in Allahabad. But it is only now, as I write down that encounter, that I realize the meaning of this very Indian question (‘Where are you coming from?’) in the way in which Naipaul had understood it. Translated back into Hindi (अप कहाँ से आये हैं), the question does not seek a full autobiography but is instead only a means of ‘locating’ the addressee, because in India you are where you come from, and that may also mean the caste to which you belong, the family you married into and the social and economic grouping willing to embrace you.

In Fiji – the first of my diasporic homes, but a lot more, my ‘homeland’ – ‘Where are you coming from?’ (in the Fijian language) has a slightly different
inflection since it is rendered as ‘Where are you staying?’ (o vaka tikotiko mai vei). But ‘staying’ does not imply the here-and-now place of residence. It carries with it, as in the original meaning of the Hindi question, the more specific sense of ancestral village or, in Fijian, one’s koro. One may live in another place for generations, but the answer given to ‘o vaka tikotiko mai vei’ is always the name of one’s koro. Fiji Indians, too, would answer this question by referring to their plantation village, that is, the plantation to which their forefathers came in the first instance.\(^4\) After the 1987 coup, when Fiji Indian identity was not deemed to be self-evidently connected to Fiji, the indigenous Fijian shadowed the question (o vaka tikotiko mai vei) with the idea of the vulagi, the foreigner, whenever the addressee happened to be an Indian. Ask the question too often in any nation-state, and with the latter-day Fijian connotation, and you begin to produce the schizophrenic social and psychological formations of diasporas. A diasporic double consciousness comes to the fore once you link this question, finally, to the presumed ultimate solution of diasporas: ‘What do we do with them now?’ In Bombay, where inter-communal relationship remained tense when I arrived, this question had indeed been asked with reference to the Indian Muslim community. As a student of diaspora theory I could see how easily a real or implied principle of exclusivism could diasporise a community that had begun to be read ambivalently ever since the partition of India in 1947 created a Muslim homeland with a fanciful name (Pakistan, ‘the land of the pure’). Where once ‘Where are you coming from?’ implied the beginning of inclusion in a community, now the same question is shadowed by another question (‘What do we do with them now?’).

The question, with its shadow, is an ‘interrogative dominant’ in the cultural logic of diaspora, because the diasporic imaginary is so crucially connected to the idea of a ‘homing desire’ (Brah 1996: 180), the idea that against one’s desh (‘home country’) the present locality is videsh (‘another country’). Behind the use of desh stands ethnic doctrines based on exclusivism and purity, and linked very often to a religiously based communal solidarity of the ethnie (A. D. Smith 1986). Behind it stands the denial that the homelands of diasporas are themselves contaminated, they carry racial enclaves, with unassimilable minorities and other discrepant communities, and are not pure, unified spaces in the first place. Even in the Jewish case history that underpins readings of diaspora (by Safran for instance), migration was largely from one in-between place to another and not from Palestine to a new land. Furthermore, historically Jewish homelands had been created wherever Jews had settled, in parts of the Middle East, in Poland, and elsewhere. Many Jews looked upon these enclaves as their homeland rather than to the Israel of the Book of Exodus. Their own diasporic episteme was located squarely in the realm of the hybrid, that is, in the domain of cross-cultural and contaminated social and cultural regimes. Though Jewish history also gives us the only successful instance of diaspora nationalism, a term that Ernest Gellner uses to define a third species of nationalism beyond the Enlightenment/democratic and eugenic (Gellner 1983: 101–9), the lived experience of the Jews was not necessarily linked to a physical
return to a homeland which, at any rate, is only possible with the return of the Messiah as the members of the Neturei Karta maintain in Israel itself. It is thus the creation of its own political myths rather than of the real possibilities of a return to a homeland which is the defining characteristic of diasporas. In a progressively multi-ethnic conception of the nation-state (in spite of the tragedy of the Balkan states and the break up of the Soviet Union, which was a nation-state only through the politics of coercion) diasporic theory bears testimony to the fact that we live in a world ‘where multi-ethnic and multi-communal states are the norm’ (Hobsbawm 1992: 179). The partition of India, the demands of the Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka, and the recent tragedy of racial cleansing in the Balkan states are very special – indeed, aberrant – cases. The memorial (and fictive) reconstructions of the ancient Jewish homeland, of the Armenian golden age in the era of the early Gregorian church, of the free city-state of Ayodhya under the Hindu god Rama or of the community of the faithful under Prophet Muhammad become the sublime signs of the ungraspable in the complex psychology of diasporas. Against this kind of discursive nostalgia (not uncommon among terrorist groups) the material history of diaspora leads us to deterritorialized peoples with a history and a future. This future, at least as an ideal, is the affirmation of the idea of the Enlightenment/democratic nation-state currently threatened by racialized ethnic states. For the fact is, as E. J. Hobsbawm writes so lucidly, ‘Wherever we live in an urbanized society, we encounter strangers: uprooted men and women who remind us of the fragility or the drying up of our own families’ roots’ (1992: 173).

The variable archives of diasporas notwithstanding, the Jewish diaspora is the fundamental ethnic model for diaspora theory, and all serious study of diasporas will have to begin with it. But what we must now do is take away from that model its essentialist, regressive and defiantly millenarian semantics and reread it through alternative models much more attuned to spatio-temporal issues and to a diaspora’s own silenced discourses of disruption and discontinuity. In this argument, the Jewish experience is simultaneously history’s conscience, its allegory of the democratic nation-state (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993: 693–725), as well as a ‘model of European transnationalism’ (Boyarin 1996: 110). We place under erasure a narrative that requires, at every point, a theory of homeland as a centre that can either be reconstituted (as actually happened with the creation of Israel) or imaginatively offered as the point of origin. We need to replace it with a narrative of social interaction in the border zones of the nation-state. A people without a homeland is not an aberration but an already prefigured cultural ‘text’ of late modernity. In other words, the positive side of diaspora (as seen in the lived ‘internationalist’ Jewish experience) is a democratic ethos of equality that does not privilege any particular ethnic community in a nation; its negative side (which is a consequence of its millenarian ethos of return to a homeland) is virulent racism and endemic nativism. This is not to say that Jews did not suffer in enlightened nation-states; nor should the argument be seen as a denial of the right to self-determination. What the argument does, however, is emphasize that the religious fossilization of the community is not its
permanent condition. What the community undergoes is a process of social semiosis whereby the tribe from a particular ‘homeland’ interacts with other cultures over a long period of time to produce diaspora. Against the fictions of a heroic past and a distant land, the real history of diasporas is always contaminated by the social processes that govern their lives. Indeed, the autochthonous pressures within diasporas, as discussed in the writing of Gellner, A. D. Smith and Safran, are of concern to diasporic subjects only when a morally bankrupt nation-state asks the question, ‘What shall we do with them?’ The unfortunate thing is that the question has been asked far too often (the Holocaust is the most obscene instance of the consequences of such a question) and continues to be asked even now. A recent example of this happened in Fiji when, soon after the coup led by George Speight in May 2000, the indigenous Fijians very loudly asked precisely this question of its own Indian diaspora. The question asked in whatever form (or embedded in an answer such as that of the Fijian prime minister Laisenia Qarase’s ‘Loss of political control and leadership is more than just an election result. It is a reflection of their [the indigenous Fijians’] worst nightmares’, Time 11 July 2005: 43) triggers the idea of the lost homeland, it ‘repeats’ the trauma, it reinforces the imaginary and darkens ‘consciousness of a racial collective as one sharing space with others, devoid of exclusivist and dominating power’ (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993: 713). As long as there is a fascist fringe always willing to find racial scapegoats for the nation’s own shortcomings and willing to chant ‘Go home’, the autochthonous pressures towards diasporic racial exclusivism, the pull of the imaginary, will remain strong. Addressing real diasporas does not mean that the discourses that have been part of diaspora mythology (homeland, ancient past, return and so on) will disappear overnight.

To pursue this argument further, we need to think through key terms that give a centre to diaspora theory. The terms I wish to gloss before I return to my own reading of the diasporic imaginary are: mourning/impossible mourning, travel and translation, and trauma.

Mourning/impossible mourning

Let me quote generously from Derrida’s Memoires for Paul de Man to anchor my thoughts on mourning:

What is an impossible mourning? What does it tell us, this impossible mourning, about an essence of memory [of anamnesia, of remembrance]? And as it concerns the other in us … where is the most unjust betrayal? Is the most distressing, or even the most deadly infidelity that of a possible mourning which would interiorize within us the image, the idol, or ideal of the other who is dead and lives only in us? Or is it that of the impossible mourning, which, leaving the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove, either refuses to take or is incapable of taking the other within oneself, as in the tomb or the vault of some narcissism?

(1986: 6)
Against impossible mourning can there be ‘true mourning’ (31)? For Derrida and for the narrative (in language) of diaspora, true mourning cannot be delinked from trope, from metaphoricity, from what Nietzsche referred to as ‘a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms’. True mourning, then, can only dictate a tendency to accept incomprehension, which means leaving it as an absence. In other words, the truth of mourning in literature, as figurative language, effectively implies that true mourning can never be defined, except as an absence. Mourning remains in us upon the death of the Other (32), and it is bequeathed to us only as memory, given in the dative case, as Derrida observes ‘to the memory’ (33). When we first meet Hamlet he is mourning his father’s death; his mourning is so vast and so inconsolable that the ‘clouds still hang on [him]’. Since the ‘truth’ of mourning never arrives, all that is left is memory, which, of course, can only be structured as a trope of absence, a ghostly trope of prosopopeia (the mode of personification that implies an absent speaker), by which memory (which like stone is silent) is given a voice (27). The normal working of mourning is precisely this, an idealization of absence because it is prior to the possibility of mourning. But ‘we can only live this experience in the form of an aporia: the aporia of mourning and of prosopopeia, where the possible remains impossible’ (35). True mourning becomes impossible because we do not accept the truth, the textuality, of mourning.

Derrida’s mourning clearly grows out of Freud’s masterly synthesis of the subject:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or the loss of some abstraction which has taken place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal and so on.

(1984a: 251–2)

The traumatic moment may be seen as crystallizing that loss, as a sign around which memory gives itself to the past – what Laplanche, in Ricciardi’s paraphrase, referred to as ‘the temporality of memory’ (Ricciardi 2003: 22). The (ideal) loss persists because there is no substitution for it in the ‘new object of love’ (in the nation-state in the case of diaspora). Freud goes on to remark that in some people ‘the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of a pathological disposition’. Or, as Angelika Rauch glosses,

unincorporated suffering or unbound affect turns a person’s history into pathology … and implies an uncompleted process that awaits belated completion before it can be incorporated into the self. Before such a completion of experience in the present, that is, before the affect can be bound in a belated image, the subject vis-à-vis her desire remains fixated on the past. This desire may be turned into a compulsion to repeat for the sake of bringing about the satisfaction of a merger between affect and signifying
image. However, in the absence of this synthesis, the subject remains in a melancholic state, not able to detach from what is lost and experienced as traumatic, and hence not able to interpret the past constructively.

(1998: 118)

Here the concept of perceived persecution is important. Whenever the nation-state is perceived as racist or imperialist – Arnold Itwaru, for instance, reads Canada as a nation-state ‘created and upheld in the ethos of imperialism’ (1994: 7) – and the therapy of self-representation is denied to diasporic peoples, a state of melancholy sets in precisely because the past cannot be constructively interpreted, the primal loss (of the homeland, a ‘lack as an a priori, ontological condition of psychic life’) cannot be replaced by the ‘new object of love’ (Freud 1984a: 252). But does the subject want to replace the object (and hence cure himself/herself of the trauma)? The condition of mourning is after all predicated upon a loss that the subject (such as Goethe’s Werther) does not want to replace because to do so would taint the purity of the object lost. The subject turns away from reality and clings on to the object of mourning even when reason dictates that the object can no longer be grasped, and the ‘work of mourning’ has to be completed before the ego can become free and uninhibited again. In the context of diasporas we need to ask, ‘When is the subject cured?’ ‘Does he/she want to be cured?’ I want to suggest that the diasporic imaginary is a condition (and ‘imaginary’ is the key concept here) of an impossible mourning that transforms mourning into melancholia. In the imaginary of diasporas both mourning and melancholia persist, sometimes in intensely contradictory ways at the level of the social. In fact, if we examine the characteristics of mourning and melancholia more closely in Freud’s essay, we are struck by the match between a diaspora’s memory of homeland (which defies representation) and the nature of the lost object that forms the basis of melancholia. In melancholia the object lost is of ‘a more ideal kind’; it is much more difficult to pinpoint as, unlike the loved object of mourning, it remains unrepresentable.

melancholia is in some ways related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.

(1984a: 254)

Failure to objectify the loss means that the emptiness and impoverishment of the world (the condition of mourning) are transferred on to the ego: ‘the complex of melancholia’, writes Freud, ‘behaves like an open wound [that empties] the ego until it is totally impoverished’ (262). But since the object of loss is never quantifiable (it is always deferred) the ego’s relationship to the lost object is much more ambivalent. It is here that Freud’s theory of melancholia gives us a useful analytical framework with which to reformulate the concept of mourning occasioned by traumatic recall; it becomes, to rephrase Ranjana
Khanna’s very astute connections between melancholia and colonialism, ‘the basis of an ethico-political understanding of diasporas’ (2003: 30). In the case of our immediate diasporic archive – the Indian/South Asian diaspora – trauma is linked to painful experiences such as the passage, plantation life, or events in the diaspora like the Komagata Maru incident involving Sikh migrants to Vancouver at the turn of the last century. Traumatic moments heighten the sense of mourning occasioned by a prior ‘death’ of the homeland which in a sense is part of the entity, the dasein, of the subject. There is no immediate cure for the condition because the loss remains abstract; it is not compensated for by happiness in the new nation-state and is therefore internalized as the emptiness of the ego itself. It leads to retreat into essentialist diasporic instrumentalities such as places of worship (church, temple, mosque) or into social collectivities from which both the nation-state’s dominant racial group as well as other diasporas are excluded. It leads to purist readings of homelands and the search for absolute ethnic states: Khalistan, Tamil Eelam, Kashmir and so on. The stages that constitute melancholia (first the loss of the object, second an ambivalent relationship to the loss, and finally the regression of the libido into the ego) parallel stages in the life of the diasporic subject, too. What is necessary, then, is the ‘freeing [of the] libido from the lost object’ (Freud 1984a: 262), and this ‘freeing’ can come only when diasporas become full participants in a nation-state’s collective history or when they write their great books and critiques, which as ‘minor literature’ (after Deleuze and Guattari 1997) would have embedded in them the possibilities of greatness precisely because their subject matter is not a pre-given. Even when, it should be added, as in the case of Freud, Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt and Celan, one carried a legacy of a mother tongue, in their case German, they could not declare it as their own and wrote and rewrote ‘according to this mourning’ (Lyotard 1990: 93). But of course the acceptance of the necessity of the struggle for empowerment does not necessarily lead to nations redefining themselves, and certainly not in the idealist terms in which the argument has been framed by what may be called romantic practitioners of diaspora theory.

Travel and translation

I borrow these words from Jim Clifford (1997), who reads them as key concepts in our understanding of an unfinished modernity. The Jews are, of course, exemplary people in the unfinished narrative of modernity either as Rebecca and her father Isaac of York in Sir Walter Scott’s Ivanhoe or as the urban cynic and estranged modern Leopold Bloom in James Joyce’s Ulysses (Docker 2001). These figures prefigure, anticipate or simply allegorize an entire history of travel, translation and displacement – Scott, of course, quite anachronistically in giving Rebecca and her father the option of settling in the Spain of the Moor Boabdil. Travel and translation (adjusting to a new land, internalizing its topography, naming it) rather than rootedness and return are the more relevant terms of debate. With Clifford, though, I wish to pause here and examine
a book that combines the Jewish fetish for writing (letters on a parchment or paper may be worked over but not obliterated so that the texts are always a palimpsest) with Jewish travel in the Arabian Sea. The book in question is Amitav Ghosh’s highly inventive *In an Antique Land* (1992), a book that combines anthropological discourse with the fictional discourse of tracing events and genealogies back to their roots. This is a tale of the Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave (the slave of the manuscript MS H.6 left behind in the Geniza or chamber of a Cairo synagogue by Ben Yiju). Although the book is fascinating as a text that recovers and reconstructs a medieval world of trade between the littoral states of the Arabian Sea, its real significance lies more in its examination of a world where identities were being formed and re-formed through contact and cultural adaptation. Amitav Ghosh’s impetus for the writing of the book is located centrally in the discipline of anthropology: a young doctoral student goes to Egypt to learn Arabic as part of his training; he masters it, returns to Oxford and writes his thesis. But that is not the text as given here. The anthropological enterprise gets transformed into a narrative of travel and translation; the native informant and the researcher fuse into one as the recovery of the narrative of the slave (finally named as Bomma) becomes an examination of two worlds: an earlier boundaryless world and a modern world of rigid boundaries and passports. Research becomes an ‘entitlement’, keeping the older meaning of a promise to be kept. The memory recovered – the history of the Indian slave from Mangalore – is, however, an occasion for nostalgia inasmuch as it gestures towards a time when the nomad or the traveller was not an aberration to be rejected through protocols of immigration and exclusion but a normative figure of celebration. Diaspora, as we know it now, comes with colonial practices which destroyed the old culture of accommodation of which Ben Yiju and his slave were a part. But, as the North African variety of Arabic (in the Hebrew script) used by Ben Yiju is an uncanny reminder of the Arabic that Ghosh himself learns at Lataifa and Nadshawy (in Egypt), so, too, does the narrative of travel and translation in medieval times connect with our own (post)modern logic of mobility, transition and translation.

The kind of travel embedded in Ghosh’s novel needs to be placed against postmodern travel through cyberspace so as to pay attention to the manner in which the discourse of the latter invades diasporic travel. A novel that demonstrates this with considerable immediacy is Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission* (2004). The novel in fact begins with a markedly digital discourse where computer language forms the basis of both metaphor and narrative. It ends with a virus released by a disgruntled computer geek from India, one Arjun Mehta, who suddenly loses his job as computer analyst in America. The novel is of immense theoretical value to the study of diasporas as it explores a culture of migration from India that is linked to a different kind of labour, whether the labour of fake foreign accents adopted by Indians in Bangalore call centres or the labour of computer work which generates the new Indian diasporic fantasy of the good life outside India. In Kunzru’s lightly parodistic treatment of that life, we get life experiences that tend to become, like the internet, virtual and without
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depth. Here travel is contained within the image of computer technology and is generated by it. Not surprisingly, Arjun Mehta’s life in the novel becomes a journey coded in the discourse and narrative of a Bollywood film such as Salaam Namaste (2005).

Trauma

As I have already suggested, diasporic writing often recalls a moment of trauma in the homeland – what Derrida, quoting Hölderlin, had again referred to as an ‘impossible mourning’ (1986: 6). We return to Hamlet’s melancholia. When we first meet him he neurotically compares a dead father with the living uncle as ‘Hyperion to a satyr’ and longs for the moment when his own very solid/sullied flesh would not only melt but indeed ‘thaw and resolve itself into a dew’. Diasporic melancholia, too, is related to a moment of trauma ‘deeply tied to our own historical realities’ (Caruth 1996: 12). The exact dating of the historical moment of trauma (which is to be distinguished from ‘historical realities of our own’) is less important than its ‘posterior resubjectifications and the restructuring of the subject that is the consequence’ (Rauch 1998: 113). To poach a definition used by Juliet Mitchell, we can say that trauma ‘must create a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it cannot be coped with by the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain or loss. The severity of the breach is such that even if the incident is expected, the experience cannot be foretold. … In trauma we are untimely ripped’ (1998: 121). And, as it happens so often, a ‘catalytic event in the present triggers an earlier occurrence which becomes traumatic only by virtue of its retrospectively endowed meaning’ (121). The Holocaust is the unspeakable example of such a catalytic event; on a much smaller (and by comparison insignificant) scale, the recent coups in Fiji (1987, 2000) or the massacre of Indians in Wismar, Guyana, in 1964 are another for the Fijian and Guyanese Indian diaspora respectively. These events retrospectively endow the original moment of trauma with added meaning: ‘There is no subject without guilt,’ writes Slavoj Žižek (1989: 180). Nor without trauma, we may add. The realist argument concerning evidence – I don’t see you particularly traumatized, or you seem to be happy enough – again leads to a disavowal of precisely the moments of origin and history which diasporas constantly, if mutedly, rewrite. However, instead of locating the loss, the moment of trauma, in the abstract loss of the homeland (which effectively forecloses diaspora theory), I would want to locate it, in the case of the plantation-Indian diaspora, in the space of the ships, the passage and the barracks. Here the long period of Indian indenture and plantation experience get transformed into a collective trauma that reappears primarily as the trauma of work and drudgery on the plantations. The discourse is then linked to the space of the barracks or the routine of plantation life: din cale kudārī rāt nīnd nahiṁ āve (‘the hoe defines my days; insomnia my nights’) sing women in the cane fields. In the context of the Canadian (East) Indian diaspora I would locate it in the Komagata Maru incident (1914) and in the corresponding theme of the
watno dur (‘away from home’). For Indians in East Africa, the trauma is often connected to demands for their repatriation to India by African nationalists, even though most are at least second-generation Indo-Africans. The Kenyan ‘expulsions’ and, more dramatically, Idi Amin’s declaration that ‘Asians’ were no longer welcome in Uganda are a case in point. For Indians from India living in the diaspora, that moment could be the tragedy of partition (Salman Rushdie continues to come to terms with that trauma) or even their own personal histories (those of Parsis in the works of Rohinton Mistry for instance).

The diasporic imaginary

The intimations of theory are present in the outline of issues given above. Here I wish to reprise part of the argument, rework the archive, narrow the terms and, above all, offer a theoretical framework for the study of diasporas. The task is not made any easier because diaspora is itself part of some other ‘cover’ field (perhaps postcolonial studies) in a segmentation that is problematic. The placement of diaspora in this larger ‘cover’ field is for many historians of diaspora a recent phenomenon because not too long ago the study of diaspora, and the definition of the term itself, was relatively straightforward. Both analysis and definition implied a grand narrative of the history of the Jewish people. To invoke diaspora presupposed a prior understanding of a linear narrative of dispersal and return of the original people of the Book. Depending upon one’s point of view, this narrative could be rendered in epic terms or in terms of the uprooted, aimless wanderer in search of home. In the latter exegesis Jewish history was represented through narratives of retribution and loss symbolized – at least in non-Jewish narratives – through the iconography of a wanderer or wayfarer whom even God had rejected. Although Charles Maturin never explicitly refers to the Jewish experience, most readers of his classic Gothic work Melmoth the Wanderer (1820) have sensed that Maturin here uses the Jewish experience as his unspeakable intertext. In the Qur’an that history is presented as a failure by the Jews to uphold a primal contract between man and God.

When we turn to descriptive predication, that is, definitions, ‘diaspora’ turns out to be a very culture-specific term. The Oxford English Dictionary refers quite explicitly to John 7.35 (‘the dispersion . . . the whole body of Jews living dispersed among the Gentiles after their Captivity’) to make the connection clear. The OED, with its characteristic homage to the written word, locates the first use of the term in Deuteronomy 28.25 where we find: ‘Thou shalt be a diaspora (or dispersion) in all kingdoms of the earth.’ The recent opening up of the word to signify the lives of ‘any group living in displacement’ (Clifford 1994: 310) is a phenomenon that probably marks a postmodern move to dismantle a logocentric and linear view of human affairs, essentialist notions of social and national cohesion that connected narratives and experiences to specific races and to origins: the model here was that of historical lexicography, of which the sublime example is the OED itself.
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The diasporic imaginary is a term I use to refer to any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement. I use the word ‘imaginary’ in both its original Lacanian sense (linked to the mirror stage of the ego, and therefore characterized by a residual narcissism, resemblance and homeomorphism [Laplanche and Pontalis 1980: 210]) and in its more flexible current usage, as found in the works of Slavoj Žižek. Žižek defines the imaginary as the state of ‘identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing “what we would like to be”’ (1989: 105). Žižek makes this point with reference to the question one asks the hysteric: Not ‘What is his object of desire?’ but ‘Where does he desire from?’ (Žižek 1989: 187). In a subsequent application of this theory to the nation itself, Žižek connects the idea of what he calls the ‘Nation Thing’ to its citizen’s imaginary identification with it. In this astute extension of the argument, the ‘nation’ (as the ‘Thing’ in Heideggerian parlance that ‘presences’ itself [Heidegger 1975]) is accessible to a particular group of people of itself because it (the group) needs no particular verification of this ‘Thing’ called ‘Nation’ (1993: 210–12). For this group, the ‘nation’ simply is (beyond any kind of symbolization). The ‘Nation qua Thing’ (to use Žižek’s phraseology) is therefore constructed out of fantasies about a particular way of life that may be enjoyed by a particular community or race. The ‘way of life’, which may be defined by any number of things – pub culture, sportsmanship (rugby in New Zealand is a classic case), capacity to live life fully, liberal values, non-negotiable connections with the land, or something totally nebulous, which has meaning only when declared as an absence (‘Why can’t they be like us?’) – is seen to come under threat by the Other (multicultural community, diaspora, ‘Protestant ethnics’, to use Rey Chow’s imaginative re-reading of the subject-as-other [2002]) since the latter has ways of enjoying the Nation that do not necessarily mirror the forms of the nation’s enjoyment of itself. Nor do these alternative forms of enjoyment correspond to how the dominant community would like the nation to be (as a reflection of their own selves). Racist phobia, Žižek suggests, arises out of a proprietary sense of enjoyment of the ‘Nation Thing’ that is the exclusive property of a given group, community or race. The politics of many right-wing parties (Jean-Marie Le Pen’s National Front in France, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation in Australia, Fijian nationalist parties) grew straight out of their racist phobia of (visible) minorities, both indigenous and diasporic (as in many settler nations), or just diasporic (as in Fiji). The current anti-Muslim nationalist rhetoric in large parts of the world (Western and non-Western) is another version of the phobia: what if these chador-wearing women are really enjoying their diasporic lives amidst us and constructing the nation ‘otherwise’?

But Žižek is not speaking in the abstract about this ‘Thing’ called the nation as if the nation were a fiction built around a narrative imaginatively constructed by its citizens. Drawing on Lacan’s definitions of ‘enjoyment’, Žižek attempts something rather different: he brings a corporeal element to definitions of the nation-state so that the nation is more than just a structure of feeling, an
‘imagined’ construct, without any foundation in the real. Here is Žižek’s crucial qualification made with an eye to definitions of the nation that have emerged in the wake of Benedict Anderson’s influential work:

To emphasize in a ‘deconstructionist’ mode that Nation is not a biological or transhistorical fact but a contingent discursive construction, an overdetermined result of textual practices, is thus misleading: such an emphasis overlooks the remainder of some real, nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment which must be present for the Nation qua discursive entity-effect to achieve its ontological consistency.

(1993: 202)

If the enjoyment of the ‘Nation Thing’ is the property of a specific community, then the Other is always seen as someone who wishes to ‘steal [the nation’s] enjoyment’ (203). But the fact remains that, in this imputation to the Other of a property that we possess (and ‘we’ here refers to those of us who own the foundational narrative of the nation), we repress the ‘traumatic fact that we never possessed what was allegedly stolen from us’ (203). Enjoyment is therefore always of the ‘imaginary’, and we continue to impute to the Other what we ourselves wish to enjoy. In other words, the fantasies of our own enjoyment return to us once we have, negatively, imputed the same to the Other. In this respect diaspora as Other has an important function to play in the construction of the fantasies of the nation-state as a Thing to be ‘enjoyed’.

Žižek, it must be said, constructs his argument with reference to the disintegration of the East European communist bloc as his test case. Here the argument is that the rise of nationalisms in Eastern Europe mirrors a democratic process that, in the West, has lost all its original vigour and excitement. These emergent nation-states as ‘Other’ give back to the West its original democratic message in the typically Lacanian form of the speaker getting back from the ‘addressee his own message in its true, inverted form’ (208). In diasporas, then, the nation-state sees the loss of an ideal, the loss of its own organic connection to the Thing which it had always taken for granted. Diasporas signify a Gesellschaft, an alienated society without any ‘organic laws’ (211), against the nation-state’s own Gemeinschaft or ‘traditional, organically linked community’ (211). The nation-state sees in them reflections of its own past, its own earlier migration patterns, its own traumatic moments, and its memories of settlement. In its extended form, it is the absence of diasporic enjoyment of the ‘Nation Thing’ in the dominant group itself (and which enjoyment is the presumption upon which the nation-state itself is based) that gives rise to the exclusion of diasporas from the national imaginary. The theorization of this fact remains incomplete since the psychology that underlies the enjoyment, an enjoyment ultimately predicated upon melancholia and loss, is never fully understood. The effects of the enjoyment are, however, clear enough. It is diasporic enjoyment of the ‘Nation Thing’ which is absent among the ‘proprietors’ of the nation that gives rise to a range of responses, chief among them...
racist exclusion, cultural denigration and misrecognition (a metaracism, after Balibar 1993), that in some sense attenuate, or even deflect, a psychology that underlies the (lost) enjoyment of the nation by the dominant community.

It follows that diasporas are embedded in nation-states that are already a ‘Thing’ created out of a specific kind of (lapsed) enjoyment of it. For the dominant citizenry, this ‘enjoyment’ is a matter of retrospect, and exists inasmuch as it is owned and possessed by it. For it, diasporas must have a homeland since only upon this presumption can the dominant group (or community or citizenry) define itself as a homogeneous entity. Indeed, homeland as ‘[a] fantasy structure, [a] scenario, through which society perceives itself as a homogeneous entity’ (Salecl 1994: 15) and which is predicated on the construction of desire around a particularly traumatic event applies equally well to the ‘owners’ of the nation in which diasporas are located. In the case of diaspora the fantasy of the homeland is linked to that recollected trauma that stands for the sign of having been wrenched from one’s mother (father) land. The sign of trauma may be the ‘[middle] passage’ of slave trade or Indian indenture. The ‘real’ nature of the disruption is, however, not the point at issue here; what is clear is that the moment of ‘rupture’ is transformed into a trauma around an absence that, because it cannot be fully symbolized, becomes part of the fantasy itself. The Ukrainian famine for the Ukrainian diaspora, or the Turkish massacres for Armenians, may be cited here. To be able to preserve that loss, the fantasy structures of homelands for diasporas very often become racist fictions of purity as a kind of jouissance, a joy, a pleasure around which anti-miscegenation narratives of homelands are constructed against the multicultural, miscegenation-prone reality of the nation-states in which diasporas are located. Racist narratives of homelands are therefore part of the dynamics of diasporas; they are distorted mirror images of the nature of enjoyment itself as imaginary homelands are constructed from the space of distance to compensate for a loss occasioned by an unspeakable trauma.

To think of diasporas in these terms, in terms of negation, in terms of discrepant or varied understanding of the enjoyment of the ‘Nation Thing’, also stipulates a consciousness of our own beings, and the necessity of intense self-reflection and finally recognition. If for the dominant community diasporas signify their own lapsed enjoyment of the ‘Nation Thing’, for diasporas facing up to their own ghosts, their own traumas, their own memories is a necessary ethical condition. To reformulate Derrida’s ‘spectres of Marx’, by which he meant the imperative of keeping the legacy of Marx visible even as we accept the imperative of globalization in a post-Soviet world order, what I believe is absolutely necessary for diasporas to do is to keep their own spectres of slavery and coolie life (and latterly graveyard shifts and work in sweatshops) firmly in place. There is, for the old Indian diaspora, a plantation history, a lived memory of the passage (Chalo Jahaji, ‘Fare forward, fellow voyagers’ (2000), is the title of a book by Fiji’s leading historian of indenture, Brij Lal) that must be firmly kept in place. The reflection demands that we constantly revisit our trauma as part of our ethical relationship to the ghosts of diaspora. It also sends
a clear signal that the idealist scenario endorsed by some diaspora theorists needs to be tempered by individual diaspora histories. In the context of the degradations suffered by Sikh migrants in British Columbia, Sadhu Binning’s observations in a poem with parallel Punjabi–English original texts act as an important reminder of another difficult, often unspoken, history so as to evoke precisely that ethical relationship to one’s past:

we forget the strawberry flats we picked
stooping and crawling on our knees
we forget the crowded windowless trucks
in which like chickens we were taken there . . .

we forget the stares that burned through our skins
the shattered moments
that came with the shattered windows
we forget the pain of not speaking
Punjabi with our children . . .

multiplying one with twenty-five
our pockets feel heavier
changing our entire selves
and by the time we get off the plane
we are members of another class.

(1994: 41–3)

To understand diasporas necessitates tampering with idealist notions of the exemplariness of diasporas in the modern world. Against a celebratory rhetoric (which would miss Binning’s ironic reference to the value of the Canadian dollar in India), the necessity of understanding a diaspora’s agony, its trauma, its pain of adjustment (before people were unceremoniously ripped apart from their mother’s wombs) with reference to other pasts, other narratives becomes decisive. And we need to accept that, contrary to idealist formulations about diasporas as symbolizing the future nation-state, diasporas are also bastions of reactionary thinking and fascist rememorations: some of the strongest support for racialized nation-states has come from diasporas; some of the most exclusionist rhetoric has come from them, too. Even as the hypermobility of postmodern capital makes borders porous and ideas get immediately disseminated via websites and search engines, diasporic subjects have shown a remarkably anti-modern capacity for ethnic absolutism. In part this is because diasporas can now re-create their own fantasy structures of homeland even as they live elsewhere. The collapse of distance on the information highway of cyberspace and a collective sharing of knowledge about the homeland by diasporas (a sharing that was linked to the construction of nations as imagined communities in the first instance) may be addressed by examining the kind of work Amit S. Rai has done on the construction of Hindu identity (Rai 1995). His research explores the new public sphere that the Indian diaspora
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now occupies as it becomes a conduit through which the conservative politics of the homeland may be presented as the desirable norm. In exploring six newsgroups – soc.culture.indian, alt.hindu, alt.islam, soc.culture.tamil, su.orig.india and INET – Rai finds that many of the postings construct India in purist terms. It is an India that is Hindu in nature and one in which an anti-nationalist secularism appeases minorities. In their invocations of important Indian religious and cultural figures – Vivekananda, R. C. Dutt and others – the subtext is always a discourse of racial purity (‘We must go to the root of the disease and cleanse the blood of all impurities’, said Swami Vivekananda) and the sexual threat to Hindus posed by the Muslims in India. The double space occupied by the diaspora (multicultural hysteria within the USA and rabid racial absolutism for the homeland) is summarized by Rai as follows:

Finally, this textual construction of the diaspora can at the same time enable these diasporics to be ‘affirmative action’ in the United States and be against ‘reservations’ in India, to lobby for a tolerant pluralism in the West, and also support a narrow sectarianism in the East.

(1995: 42)

Although Rai’s conclusions may be suspect – the postings need not lead to the correlation he discovers – it should be clear that diasporas construct homelands in ways that are very different from the way in which homeland peoples construct themselves. For an Indian in the diaspora, for instance, India is a very different kind of homeland than for the Indian national. The diaspora wants, in Suketu Mehta’s words, ‘an urban, affluent, glossy India, the India they imagine they grew up in and wish they could live in now’ (2004: 351), an India projected by Bollywood.

At the same time, and as we have suggested above, the nation-state needs diasporas to remind it of what the idea of homeland is. Diasporic discourse of the homeland is thus a kind of return of the repressed for the nation-state itself, its pre-symbolic (imaginary) narrative, in which one sees a more primitive theorization of the nation-state. Thus historically both the Jewish and the gypsy diasporas – two extreme instances of diaspora, and both slaughtered by the Third Reich – have been treated by nation-states with particular disdain because they exemplify in varying degrees characteristics of a past that nation-states want to repudiate. For Franz Liszt the gypsy diaspora was a ‘crisis for Enlightenment definitions of civilization and nationalist definitions of culture’ (Trumpener 1992: 860). The Jews, equally a problem but with an extensive sense of history and civilization, carried all the characteristics of an ethnic community (ethnie) and thus were both an earlier condition of the European nation-state and its mythical nemesis (A. D. Smith 1986: 22–30, 117). In late-eighteenth-century France, and in Germany (unified only in 1871), the Jews posed, for the European, a problem for an understanding of how races entered the logic of modernity. As Jonathan M. Hess has pointed out, between Christian Wilhelm Dohm’s treatise on the improvement of the Jews (On the Civic Improvement of the Jews [Ueber die bürgerliche
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Verbesserung der Juden, 1781) and the unification of Germany heated discussions on the ‘moral, political and physical “regeneration” of the Jews’ continued (Hess 2002: 4). David Michaelis (1717–91) felt that the Jews were racially degenerate, by climate and physique quite incapable of standing up to the heroic German. To the French, hot on the heels of revolutionary fervour, the Jews were seen as ‘the ultimate anti-citizen’, a perfect case for a ‘thought experiment’ designed to test ‘revolutionary principles of the moral transformation of both individuals and the French nation as a whole’ (Hess 2002: 5). Dohm had read the Jews totally negatively and seen their transformation into German enlightenment citizens as being of the utmost importance. It is not too difficult to read into this version of the modern citizen a failure to tolerate difference ‘in the quest for uniformity and universalism’ (Hess 2002: 8), an attitude that Hess himself sees as a failure to understand the manner in which German Jewry negotiated (with considerable difficulty given Christianity’s claim to ‘normative status in the modern world’ and its supersession of Judaism) modernity from within by pointing out Judaism’s own enlightened principles.7

If the gypsies were read as the absolute instance of a nomadic tribe (‘a dirty gypsy’ is a term of abuse in both Hungary and Romania), the profound historicity of the Jewish people gave their diaspora a specially privileged position in diasporic theory. Diasporic theory, then, uses the Jewish example as the ethnic model for purposes of analysis or at least as its point of departure. But Jewish diasporas were never totally exclusivist – ‘not isolation from Christians but insulation from Christianity’ was their motto, as Max Weinreich put it – and met the nation-state halfway in its border zones (Clifford 1994: 326). Jewish ‘homelands’, for instance, were constantly being re-created: in Babylon, in the Rhineland, in Spain, in Poland and even in America with varying degrees of autonomy (A. D. Smith 1986: 117). Movement ceased to be from a centre (Israel/Palestine/Judaea) to a periphery and was across spaces of the ‘border’. Against the evidence, Zionist politics interpreted the Jewish diaspora as forever linked to a centre and argued that every movement of displacement (from Spain to France, from Poland to America) carried within it the trauma of the original displacement (such as that from Judaea to Babylon). In retrospect, one can see how readily such a logic would erase the idea of nation as ‘palimpsestic text’ and replace it with the idea of nation as a racially pure ethnic enclave. In a very significant manner, then, the model of the Jewish diaspora is now contaminated by the diasporization of the Palestinians in Israel and by the Zionist belief that a homeland can be artificially reconstructed without adequate regard to intervening history. In 1914 the population of Palestine was around 690,000, of which fewer than 60,000 were Jews.

The theoretical problematic posed here is not simply Zionist. In no less a work of art than George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda, the ‘Jew’ enters the realist novel to take on world-historical questions of exile and what F. R. Leavis called the ‘racial mission’ (1962: 99). Here what seems like a more powerful sexual desire on the part of Deronda for Gwendolen has to be repressed (and even denied) once Deronda is made aware of his race through Mordecai, Mirah’s

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Zionist brother, and comes to feel ‘he must glorify the possibilities of the Jew’ (Eliot 1988: 405). In marrying Mirah and finally heading ‘East’ (Palestine), Daniel Deronda affirms his place in a larger history that transcends both emotion (love for Gwendolen) and nation (England as the immediate home) in favour of a new ‘remaking’ signalled by George Eliot in a chapter epigraph taken from Heine: ‘Despite his enmity to art, Moses was a great artist ... he built pyramids of men, he sculpted obelisks of men, he took a poor peasant slave and made a people that would last for hundreds of years. He made Israel (er Schuf Israel)’ (637).

Years after George Eliot, we need to keep the Palestinian situation in mind in any theorization of diasporas even as we use the typology of the Jewish diaspora to situate and critique the imaginary construction of a homeland as the central mythomoteur of diaspora histories. The reason for this is that displaced Palestinians and their enforced mobility force us to distinguish between the Zionist project of Israel and the historically deterritorialized experiences of Jewish people generally. The latter point is made by Boyarin and Boyarin (1993). Echoing Max Weinrich, they re-read the Jewish diaspora through a postcolonial discourse in which Jewishness is seen as a disruptive sign in the mosaic of history and an affirmation of a democratic ethos of equality that does not privilege any particular ethnic community in a nation. Against the Zionist fictions of a heroic past and a distant land, the real history of diaspora is always contaminated by social processes and in the end by nationalist forces that govern their lives. Indeed, diasporas become more than just theoretical propositions once a morally bankrupt nation-state asks the question seen by Sartre as the nation’s racist solution, ‘What do we do with them now?’ In a post-9/11 world order that question is being asked about Muslims generally, diasporic or not. In that interrogative mood, diasporas, too, may be asked to declare whether they are ‘for us or against us’. For me, Sartre’s question remains what may be called the ‘transcendental absolute’ against which we compose a diaspora theory. To forget this fear is to ignore one of the principal lessons of modern history.

Nations are not fixed entities, national cultures are not absolute cultures, they are not governed, like religion, by perennial, universal values. Nations and cultures are products of their multifaceted histories, and they grow and change with the times. Diasporas tell us much about the evolution of cultures. As a social fact of late modernity, diasporas ‘call into question the idea that a people must have a land in order to be a people’ (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993: 718). Of course, the danger of this reading is that diasporas may well be romanticized as the ideal social condition in which communities are no longer persecuted. But diasporas also remind settler nation-states in particular about their own past, about their own earlier migration patterns, about their traumatic moments, about their memories, their own repressed pain and wounds, about their own prior and prioritized enjoyment of the nation. In the end, diasporas should not be thought of through the simplistic logic of the binary. We need to think about them as ‘nonnormative’ communities not necessarily locked into the binary
of ‘exile’ (the condition of a declared stand against a homeland’s policies and hence revered) and ‘diaspora’ (a ‘chosen geography and exile’) (Barkan and Shelton 4). We need to look at people’s corporeal or even ‘libidinal’ investments in nations (as denizens or as outsiders); we need to read off a modernist ‘transcendental homelessness’ against lived experience (‘all my life ah try to live in de Geeta and de Ramine’ [all my life I have tried to live through the Gītā and the Rāmāyaṇa], writes Narmala Shewcharan, a Guyanese, in Creolized English); and we need to think through critically the effects of the aesthetic (as ‘contrapuntal ensembles’, dialogic expressions, discrepant discourses or as ‘minor’ literature) on both diasporic and host citizens (Bammer 1998: 23–8). I emphasize aesthetic archives of the diaspora largely because I believe that political and social battles often emerge most powerfully in the domain of the aesthetic and especially when the aesthetic is also a critique. And when, as in Subramani’s path-breaking Fiji-Hindi novel Daukā Purāṇ (2001), the demotic itself becomes the discourse of the aesthetic, we begin to understand the hitherto silenced voice of the subaltern in diaspora. Recognition comes, finally, through art, a point made so graphically in Mohini Chandra’s multi-media installations (on the Tate Learning website for instance) on the theme of diaspora as she, twice displaced (she was born in England), works through the inter-generationally transmitted trauma of her Fiji-Indian heritage. We begin therefore with the primarily subaltern old Indian diaspora in our study of the literature of the Indian diaspora.
1 The girmit ideology

As they flew over the sugar-cane farms of Blefuscu, he noted the high piles of black igneous boulders near the centre of each field. Once indentured Indian labourers [the Indo-Lillys], identified only by numbers, had broken their backs to clear this land, building these rock piles under the stony supervision of Australian Coolumbers ['call numbers'] and storing in their hearts the deep resentment born of their sweat and the cancellation of their names.

(Salman Rushdie 2001: 238)

Performing the final rites of my father’s funeral, for which I returned to Fiji after a long break, the priest narrated the story of Ahalya, transformed into stone by her ascetic-husband’s curse, and brought back to life as the stone is brushed by the dust of Lord Rama’s feet (Vijay Mishra 1989). Remembering the story of curse and redemption takes me back to a theoretical model of the girmit ideology (Vijay Mishra 1977) with which I wish to begin the substantive chapter of this book. Although the term girmit is peculiar to the Fiji Indian plantation experience and, marginally, to the South African Indian (‘the indentured labourers who went to Natal … came to be known there as girmitiyas from girmit’, wrote Mahatma Gandhi [1959: 77]), the girmit ideology may be productively read as a ‘sign’ which gives the experience of the ‘old’ Indian indenture diaspora a theoretical template. The girmit ideology – and the word girmit (from ‘agreement’) is the Fiji plantation diaspora’s vernacularized neologism not only for the indenture system, but also for a singular subaltern plantation experience – designates a form of consciousness, a system of imaginary beliefs, and defines ‘a subaltern knowledge category’ (Sudesh Mishra 2005: 15) that grew out of the collective indenture ethos. ‘Agreement’, the contract, now represents, through a process of linguistic cross-coding, an entire ethos, a legend, a tyranny and, finally, a history outside and of time and an ideology. ‘Girmit’, writes Sudesh Mishra, ‘comes into being at that extreme point when a positive intentionality – which is, after all, a species of good faith – is traumatically and perplexingly violated in the very place and time of its anticipated fruition’ (2005: 23). The violation, the failed millenarian quest, required transcendence (of the originary indenture experience), but it was an impossible transcendence because it required the ‘experience’ to be materially completed, it required a cure in the form of a postcolonial nation state where the pain of indenture may be transformed into a triumphalism of sorts and the experience itself recognized in the full sense in which Charles Taylor used the word. Although specific to the
Indo-Fijian indenture experience, the term *girmit* may be productively used to designate the life-worlds of the old Indian diaspora generally.

In his foreword to *Our Struggle*, the autobiography of Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, the first Mauritian prime minister, Kher Jagatsingh, the nation’s Minister of Education and Culture, referred to one form of cure, ‘the creation of the ideal Ram Rajya’, invoking in the process both an epic ideal (of a golden nation-state) and Gandhi’s own allegorical rendition of the postcolonial nation as encapsulating an ideal religious polity. The push for transcendence becomes a lot more complex because we are dealing here with an ideology for which memory, promise and trauma are constitutive characteristics. Like any ideology the *girmit* ideology has at once historical depth and ‘metaphysical’ resonance. Even though the word itself does not survive as a marker of indenture experience in sugar plantations beyond Fiji and South Africa, it manifests itself, to borrow words from Terry Eagleton’s study of ideology, in acts that are ‘affective, unconscious, mythical or symbolic’ as well as in those that are rational and consciously articulated (Eagleton 1991: 221). Terry Eagleton’s understanding of ideology as something that encapsulates ‘the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness’ (Eagleton 1991: xiii) and is a ‘socially necessary illusion’ may be superimposed readily on to my understanding of the *girmit* ideology. The ‘illusion’ grew out of a (communal) memory of an ancient land that had been lost. The memory remained primarily ‘oral’, existing as it did initially through a form of epic rememoration of one’s past on the part of the first indentured labourers until supplanted by the products of written and then image technology: newspapers and then film. Referring to oral memory and the Trinidad Indian experience, V. S. Naipaul said in his Nobel lecture: ‘[We] were pretending – perhaps not pretending, perhaps only feeling, never formulating it as an idea – that we had brought a kind of India with us, which we could, as it were, unroll like a carpet on the flat land’ (Naipaul 2003: 187).

There was memory, yes, but promise, too. A promise had been made by agents and recruiters, a promise about riches and indenture (or, at least, this is how memory recast the promise), and through the promise of riches the possibilities of a glorious or heroic return home. For the despised, listless subaltern (whose self-definition rarely went beyond caste and village), this was an extraordinary promise but quite incapable of being realized in fact. So there was not going to be any collective return; promise had to be transformed into the present, into a political will for justice in the nation state itself. In the history of modernity India, the diaspora’s motherland, was the nation that linked modernity to an anti-colonial struggle and planted in that struggle the ideas of moral value and individual worth: ‘India was in the forefront of the struggles for independence,’ notes the Guyanese Indian leader Cheddi Jagan in his autobiography (1980: 45). Promise then gets linked to a very real mode of political empowerment; and, since that empowerment (as an anti-colonial/anti-imperialist struggle) happened to occur in one’s ancestral homeland, it acquired a very special meaning. Not unnaturally, the *girmit* diaspora mimicked the homeland’s own struggle for political self-determination. In this respect in all the
The girmit ideology

plantation diasporas politics became very much a replication of the rhetoric of the Indian National Congress, and hence a nationalism that repeated a prior metropolitan reading of the nation through its Indian mediation. Presented in this fashion, the replication also meant a failure to theorize those rights that could not be contained within the narrative of nationalism, rights such as those of native peoples (as in Fiji) or other racial groups such as the Afro-West Indians in Trinidad and Guyana, and Creoles in Mauritius. It is precisely these rights that the Mahatma himself didn’t quite understand. The Dalit (‘Untouchable’) leader Dr Ambedkar once declared, echoing Marx, ‘But Mahatmaji I have no country’, because he wanted, against Gandhi’s unitary narrative of the state, a narrative that would include multiple and discrepant modes of representation so that ‘communals’ were not lost in the normative narrative of the anti-imperialist struggle.

The girmitiyas came from ‘an old and perhaps an ancient India’ untouched by the ‘great reform movements of the nineteenth century’ (V. S. Naipaul 1976: 13). Naipaul was referring specifically to his own grandfather’s generation, but this reading has a much wider significance. In the case of Fiji, the 60,945 Indians who went there between 1879 and 1917 represented a good cross-section of the major Sanskrit-based and Dravidian-based languages, castes and religious groups of India. A close reading of the emigration passes (such as that found in Brij Lal, 1983) indicates that there is a quite remarkable congruity between the caste and religious distribution of the migrants and their counterparts in the regions from whence they came. I don’t want to dwell too long on the history of indenture in summary form here as I shall be returning to it at other points in this book. However, some historical facts directly relevant to the Fiji case (my principal archive for the girmit ideology) may be readily reprised. First, most Fiji Indians trace their ancestry to those 60,945 indentured labourers who were brought to Fiji between 1879 and 1917. Second, the north–south population distribution was about 4 to 1, and the Hindu Muslim about 10 to 1. While north–south divisions persisted in matters of marriage (but never completely), there was little sense of communal difference among people from the various regions of India because plantation life imposed uniformity at various levels: language, food, clothing and, perhaps most importantly, labour. Over time, though, Muslims in Fiji, as elsewhere, became rather different in spite of continuing to share all the features of the indenture experience. Islam and Muslim marriage practice (notably first-cousin marriages inadmissible in the dominant Hindu community) gradually introduced a Muslim exclusiveness which with the creation of Pakistan effectively created a different homeland for the Muslims. In Mauritius the adoption of Arabic as the Muslim ancestral language is an extraordinary case of an attempt by Indian Muslims there to erase their cultural past, something which even Pakistan, in adopting Urdu, an Indian language not indigenous to Pakistan, did not do. The erasure of the Indian Muslim from the Mauritian Indian diaspora is accelerated further by a governmental policy that divides the population between a Hindu community, a Muslim community and a Creole (‘General’) community.
In matters of political representation, although both colonial and Fijian administrations did not create further communal constituencies on the basis of religion, the demand for separate Muslim constituencies has persisted in Fiji. In spite of these differences, though, and the later insistence on difference on the basis of Islam, the teaching of the Nastaliq (Urdu) script in Muslim schools (Indian schools in Fiji teach Hindi), the general ideology of girmi has persisted at the level of everyday life. The descendants of girmityas, collectively, have an identifiable ethos that began as ship-brotherhood (jahājī bhāi).

A third general point I wish to make relates to comprador migration within the old Indian diaspora. A number of mainly Gujarati migrants came to Fiji from around 1914 onwards as free migrants and quickly established themselves as small-time traders in the towns. Although they never reached the heights of European capitalists, they became the visible face of Indian commercial success. A relatively small trading community needs endogamous coherence to maintain its commercial advantage, and because this community was already global (East Africa, Singapore, Hong Kong, even New Zealand) Fiji Gujaratis could bring their husbands and wives from either the transnational diaspora or from India if a spouse were not available from within their caste in Fiji. They were also the only Fiji Indian community that maintained its separate language. So in matters of identity their relationship to Fiji was rather different from those of the other Fiji Indians and their commercial self-interest not necessarily identical with those of the Fiji Indians, which is why in Fiji the term girmitya, or even ‘Hindustani’, is never applied to them. A trading class, as the African East Indian case showed so well, is largely indifferent to political change provided that the capitalist economy is not threatened. There were, of course, pockets of other migrants – Christians who came as helping hands of missionaries, Sikhs as part of the police force, and even a few Gurkhas as part of the colonial military regiment. The first peasant revolt in Fiji was in fact undertaken by about sixty Pathans and Punjabis (Sikhs) who refused to be inducted into indenture because they argued that they had been recruited for the Fiji police force. In the ensuing fracas three were wounded, but their demands were quietly set aside as each was sent to a different estate (Tinker 1974: 231). These are matters of localised Fiji Indian ethnic politics and have little bearing on native Fijian perception of the Indian. So far as the Fijians were concerned, the Indian working class (with whom the Fijian commoner had lots in common) and the Indian business class (which gradually included Gujaratis as well as girmityas with whom the Indian lumpenproletariat had nothing in common) were equally kai Idia vulagis, or foreigners who enjoyed the nation ‘otherwise’. The collective phrase applied to Indians was used as a metaphor for people without customs and traditions: vakataki iva na Idia – e sega tu na nodra i tovo (‘just like Indians – a people without customs and traditions’); it was a telling part of an absolutist discourse in which the Indian was outside of the Fijian ‘nation’, an unwanted canker in its side, about whom, as early as 1927, Harry L. Foster had written scathingly as ‘spidery-looking coolies, mere bony frames in loin-cloths . . . gnarled and gaunt and crooked and fleshless – with the most hideous bodies
in the world’ (243–4). Nowhere is this discourse of exclusivism more marked than in the writings of the Fijian historian Dr Asesela Ravuvu, who makes it quite clear that if a vulagi (‘visitor’ or ‘foreigner’, here the Indian) ‘does not comply to the host’s [the taukei’s, the indigenous Fijian’s] expectations then he may very well leave before he is thrown out of the house’ (Ravuvu 1991: 58–60). The narrative of Ravuvu suggests that Rabuka’s 1987 Fiji coup happened because the vulagi had over-stepped his mark. What Dr Ravuvu does not gloss, but which remains implicit in his discourse, is the other term for Indians – mataqali kalavu (‘communal rats’) – which Harry L. Foster had noted as a Fijian term of abuse in 1927 (1927: 254).

These displaced Indians – insecure, confused, disoriented and hysterical from the start, and who upon arrival referred to Fiji as narak, ‘hell’ – manifested classic features of ‘fragment’ societies studied by historians such as Louis Hartz (Hodge and Mishra 1991). Hartz is, of course, writing about white settler nations whose ‘ideology’, fossilized, regressive, perhaps even backward after its initial phase, generates the dominant narrative of settler nations: American New England Puritanism, Canadian prairie ruggedness, Australian bush ethos, New Zealand Benthamite paradise or even South African Boer sense of the Calvinist elect. Nothing of that kind happened to the Fiji Indians, who were a motley group of illiterate peasants suddenly confronting modernity and the need to reconstitute themselves as a community. There is no equivalence between Fiji Indians and other settler communities when it comes to power (settlers had complete control over the indigenous peoples and of the agenda of the nation), but the processes of change were remarkably parallel. Like white settler communities the Fiji Indian fragment also underwent two stages of change. Its initial stage – a constant process of assimilating later migrants into a socially inclusive community – was marked by a highly imaginative and egalitarian sense of social cohesion and purpose. In this stage the fragment redefined itself in a much more dynamic manner against those rigid, ‘time immemorial’ oppositions (caste divisions, social laws governing purity) that characterized the homeland. The first 40 years of indenture, when there was a continuous arrival of new migrants, were probably the most exciting period. But the excitement of reconstitution, the desire to create a dynamic, critically self-aware society that grew as much out of the reality of Fiji as a multiracial nation, was overtaken by a sense of loss, characterized by an inwardness, even an insularity. What triumphed was the ideology of the ‘fossil’, which meant also the triumph of myth over history. The fragment began to show an almost total lack of self-reflexivity or relationality. Excitable and prone to political hysteria, it became so self-enclosed that its activism became purely political, and a parody of the anti-colonial struggle of the Indian National Congress. In this it followed liberal principles to the letter and fought for a fair and just society. But its politics worked from within the insularity of the fragment, not from the realities of the multiracial state.

A reading of the early issues of Indian newspapers in Fiji, Fiji Samachar (begun January 1927) and Shanti Dut (first issue May 1935), shows how powerfully
these papers reinforced the sense of ethnic solidarity and nostalgia for India. Collectively they created an imagined India that could be replicated in Fiji. So when the nation is referred to in the epigraph of all issues of *Fiji Samachar*, the reference to ‘desh’ is both India and Fiji:

jis ko na nij gaurav nahin nij desh ka abhimayan hai
vo nar nahin nar paasu nir aur mrtak saman hai

Who take pride neither in their own selves nor in their nation
Men they’re not, but animals certainly, and indeed carrion.

A theory of a fragment society is no more than an explanatory model, a framework against which we test social realities. Explanatory models, as theory, can never account for all moments, all nuances, all variations but what they do is provide us with a focal or reference point. The theory of the fragment briefly alluded to above finds a surprisingly cogent proof text in a rare ‘testimonio’ (‘a narrative … told in the first person by a narrator who is the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts’, as John Beverley defines it [2004: 81]) of indenture life in Fiji. This account is by one Totaram Sanadhya whose ship, *Jumna*, reached Fiji waters on 23 May 1893. By then some 12,000 indentured labourers (some with Fiji-born children) were already in Fiji.

Sanadhya’s emigration pass shows that he was registered as a labourer on 2 February 1893, he came from a small village in the district of Agra, he had scars on his belly (?), his age is given as 16, and he was of the Thakur or Kshatriya caste. The last two entries are not correct. Sanadhya was in fact 18 years old and he was of the Brahmin caste. It is unusual for Indians to declare a caste different from their own because in India caste is a matter of public knowledge and public acknowledgement. But perhaps in this instance what is being alluded to is a prejudice among recruiting agents against Brahmins, who were deemed to be ineffectual agriculturalists and rigid in their social behaviour. At any rate anecdotal small talk among Fiji Indians indicates that the practice of Brahmins declaring themselves to be other than their own caste may not have been uncommon. The truth of caste antecedents perhaps lay not so much in the declarations or otherwise of being a Brahmin as in the manifest demonstration of a mastery of the textual tradition, something that Brahmins alone possessed. In terms of this test, Totaram Sanadhya was a Brahmin to his bones. Sanadhya was to spend the next 21 years in Fiji, first as bonded labourer, then as farmer and priest. He married the daughter of a fellow emigrant and returned to India with his wife and mother-in-law in 1914.

Upon his return to India, Totaram Sanadhya narrated his account of life in Fiji to Banarsidass Chaturvedi, an Indian nationalist, who acted both as amanuensis and publisher. Parts of the account appeared in Indian journals between 1915 and 1922. The handwritten manuscript, however, was handed to Ken Gillion, the foundational figure of Fiji Indian historiography, around 1955 by Chaturvedi himself. In 1980, Gillion left the manuscript for editing and
publication with his PhD student Brij Lal, the current authority on the Fiji Indians. My own working text is the published version of the manuscript titled *Bhūṭlen kī Kathā* [A Tale of the Haunted Line] (1994). The narration, appropriately, begins with Sanadhya’s arrival as a bonded labourer in Nausori, the town of the first seventeen years of my life and also the first spatial crux after my signature in the acknowledgements section of this book.

On the 28th of [May?] 1893 I reached the Nausori plantation barracks as one of 141 indentured labourers of the Fiji Colonial Sugar Refining Company. On the order of the Sector Manager, the English overseer [strictly ‘English-speaking’ as he was Australian] managed to allocate rooms to everyone else except me … he then tells me that I can only be accommodated in the haunted line … which I must now describe forthwith. Nausori coolie lines had 26 barracks. Each barrack had 24 rooms, 12 feet long and 8 feet wide (3.66m x 2.44m). Three people lived in each room but if you were a couple you had the room to your selves. A mother with children would also be given just one room. In this way some 1500 men and women lived in the lines. Some six chains (120 metres) away from the last barrack was the haunted line which had been inhabited at some time by indigenous Fijian workers of the CSR [Colonial Sugar Refining] Company. When after an illness eight of them died, the others simply ran away. Since then this line has been called *bhūṭlen* (‘haunted line’) and no worker wants to live there. Nobody came close to it in the night. … The overseer said, ‘This will be your home for the next five years, should you leave it you won’t get another, and at any rate it is a crime to abscond’. … This line had the usual 24 rooms … it was surrounded by thick, long grass … infested with mosquitoes and crickets … to one side of the line, some distance away, was the sugar mill whose engines made a dreadful noise all day. Some three chains (60 metres) away was the [Rewa] river. … Later all new coolies were given their weekly ration of food: 3 kilograms of flour, 1 kilogram of dhal, 250 grams of ghee, 125 grams of salt, and so on.

The account that follows, the clearest contemporary account of the early fragment as it comes into being, traces a number of key developments surrounding indenture that will ‘resonate in the early histories of Indian indentured communities elsewhere as well’ (Lal 2000: 239). There is much here, as markers of the materiality of a historical memory, that is of value to an understanding of the formation of Fiji Indian culture. I will, however, go through the information selectively, picking out those observations which provide material support for our reading of the fragment. I begin by selecting Sanadhya’s lament upon seeing Indians in bondage and his cry for help from the motherland. The lament is specially powerful whenever the lives of women on plantations are described. Here is one woman’s confessional:
Seven years after our wedding my husband died leaving behind myself, my three-year old son and my mother-in-law. I left my son with my mother-in-law and went to Dwarka for a propitious tattoo. Then with a few villagers I went to the city of Mathura and got lost in the crowd. And then as fate would have it, here I am . . . I feel like dying.

Once sick and hungry in this tenebrous and uninviting land, Sanadhya attempts to hang himself but is saved, fortuitously, by some Fijian villagers whom he had befriended. Sanadhya’s relationship with the Fijians is not unusual and is symptomatic of an early fragment society much more willing to engage with native peoples because of mutual need. The inter-personal as a feature of everyday life is almost totally empty of racism: Sanadhya and the Fijians eat each other’s food (although it seems that Sanadhya is a vegetarian and a teetotaller) and learn each other’s language.

Among themselves the indenture Indian fragment created social capital from a limited number of books and artefacts and through a willed harnessing of a collective memory. We get a sense of this cultural capital when we examine the books that people shared: the *Tulsídás Rámâyáña*, the *Sukh Ságar*, the *Satyanáráyaṇ Kathá*, the *Súrya Puráṇa*, *Indrajáäl*, Álha Kámā and *Indar Sabhá*. A few other sundry titles complete the catalogue. The *Qur’án* is not mentioned, but it is likely that an Urdu translation (in the Persian Nastaliq or Sanskrit Devanágri script) was also available. The Christian Bible in Hindi (*Dharmaśátra*) is not mentioned, either. In one case a book is lent out at the rate of two rupees per day. We may pause to look at the likely impact of two of these texts: the *Tulsídás Rámâyáña* and *Indar Sabhá*. The *Tulsídás Rámâyáña*, of course, had everything in it for the *girmit* experience: fourteen years banishment for the epic hero and God incarnate Rama, trials and tribulations in the black forest of Dandak, symbolic ravishing of his wife by the demon king Ravana, Rama’s victory over Ravana, and his return to the utopian metropolis of Ayodhya, what Ramabai Espinet’s character Mona Singh in *The Swinging Bridge* recalls as the ‘tale of exile and banishment . . . in broken chords and unexpected riffs telling the story of a race’ (2004: 113). Although the Tulsidasa text omitted a key episode – Rama’s subsequent rejection of Sita after returning to his kingdom – this part of the narrative was generally known and is a crucial structure for our understanding of the rejection of Mother India (Sita-incarnate) when the diaspora actually returns to the motherland. Apart from the key structure of banishment and the presence of the demonic rákṣasas (the derogatory word for native Fijians, but also the word used to qualify indenture: rákṣasi-kulí(coolie)-prathá, ‘the demonic practice of indenture’), the *Tulsídása Rámâyáña* was written in plain demotic Hindi (in the Avadhi dialect) and was profusely sprinkled with homilies for every occasion: marriage, death, sorrow, even agriculture and storm. *Indar Sabhá* held a different fascination. It was the popular text without equal, and very much a mid-nineteenth-century work. It
The girmit ideology was the equivalent of Oliver Twist for post-1840 British migrants to settler colonies. Composed by Agha Hasan Amanat (Amanat Ali 1816–59), during the final years of the independent state of Avadh under the poet-nawab Wajid Ali Shah, this drama centred on King Indar captured the popular imagination as none other. It was quickly transliterated from its original Urdu into Hindi and a number of other Indian languages. Kathryn Hansen, from whose essay I have drawn the foregoing, refers to Indar Sabha as ‘a landmark in the canons of literary history and a foundational moment in the evolution of the popular culture in South Asia’ (Hansen 2001: 79). In the style of the Indo-Persian mathnavīs (romances) the story combines Hindu and Muslim motifs of heaven and fairies, gives space to the Hindu Lord of Death as well as to the earthly prince, the nawab, who is infatuated by desire and suffers from viraha or love-longing. For the Indian fragment in Fiji four features stand out: first, the idea of separation of lovers and their reunion; second, the mingling of many narrative traditions; third, the special synthesis of Muslim and Hindu forms; and finally a language that resonated with the evolving cadences of Fiji Hindi, itself, like Indar Sabha, a mixture of Urdu, Braj, Avadhi, Bhojpuri and Khari Boli Hindi. Although perhaps not as a consequence of the prevalence of this text in the Fiji Indian fragment, references to Raja Indar as a kind of heavenly superstar (responsible for rain, thunder, and perhaps even crops) were not uncommon. When Indian cinema came to Fiji, films based on the Indar Sabha themes were always extremely popular: Indar Sabha (1932); Jalpari (1952); Husn ka Chor (1953); Roop Kumari (1956). In the Shanti Dutt of 21 March 1936 another film with Indar Sabha associations, Shrin Farhad (1931), is advertised as a film that played to full houses.

Some of Sanadhya’s references to the persistence of oral tradition are echoed in a rain song (a caumāsā) in which this genre is harnessed towards a diasporic semantics so that the song works on a dual temporality and semantic content, at once about plantation and pre-plantation life; at once about love-longing and national-yearning. Colloquially referred to as ‘bidesiyas’ in Fiji, this caumāsā variant utilizes a key theme of the genre (viraha, or love-in-separation) to carry the girmitiya self back spectrally, a suturing made possible, as Sudesh Mishra remarks in his astute reading, ‘by the actual severance from the desired temporality’ (2002b: 139).

ghir ghir badrā, sāvanvā kī hai rāma
kaunī nagariyā menī cahi re bidesiyā
gaiyā behāl more kothovā pe bhūke roye
āṁkhīyoṁ se asuvā bahāye re bidesiyā
amuvā ke ōliyā meṇī kuhuke koyaliyā
manavā menī agiyā lagāye re bidesiyā
hari hari patiyā pe likh likh hari hari
kavani nagariyā menī cahi re bidesiyā

The monsoon clouds are gathered, O Rama,
But in which place dwells the stranger?
My cattle are tethered and weep from hunger,
Tears abound in the eyes of the stranger.
On a mango’s branch the koel cries kuhuke,
He sets my heart on fire, the stranger.
Signing green leaves with the Lord’s signature,
In what place abides the stranger?
(Sudesh Mishra 2002b: 139–40)

In due course Sanadhya, who was literate and a Brahmin, masters the body of religious and folk texts common to these indentured labourers and becomes a priest and a farmer. Compared to the other labourers, he does well out of these two professions. But religion does not get fixed or codified in this early phase; instead sectarian worship based on the earlier itinerant Indian bhakti (devotional) tradition of saint-singers such as Kabir, Nanak, Dadu, Jagjivandas and Ramanand begins to take hold. This heterogeneous mode of religious behaviour (largely though not always all-embracing and unmarked by doctrinal exclusiveness) created a form of worship linked to collective chanting, a feature which explains the continued appeal of ‘Rāmāyaṇ maṇḍalīs’ (Ramayan groups) in the girmit diaspora. Sanadhya deals with a number of these sects quite extensively, explaining their localities, the number of devotees in each, the amounts of money raised by individual groups, as well as the predictable divisions among the believers. Some of the leaders of these panths or sects in Fiji, such as Pingaldas, Sitavdas, Ramnath, have since entered girmit folklore. Gradually, as Sanadhya documents, a number of social characteristics begin to emerge that part company with the social behaviour of a similar group back in India. Indians on plantations drink alcohol, they eat meat, and show much less of the self-piety that marks Sanadhya himself. Once Sanadhya accosts a decadent Indian guru and asks him why he eats meat, drinks alcohol, and generally behaves ‘like an animal’. This is the guru’s reply:

Yes it was because we were deemed animals in the first place that the recruiters sold us into indenture. We learned animal ways right from the start. We lost all self-respect and coming to Fiji made us even more like animals. At least animals work according to certain fixed ways, certain principles, but we have neither social norms nor any one to tell us what these should be. So here we are, children of the great wandering sages of India now recast as the foremost gentleman animal, ‘Mr Coolie Fiji’.

(1994: 76)

This is a devastating speech, prescient and despairing and directed, suggestively, at Sanadhya himself, who, quite characteristically, misses the jibe. Even in its excessive self-deprecating style the speech alludes to the kinds of creative social and religious accommodation that was possible only in the fragment of which Sanadhya is at times more of an observer than a participant and actor. Key rituals such as those relating to birth and marriage were modified; there
was a peculiarly Fiji Indian marriage practice of *andhādhandha* where both Hindu and Muslim chants were recited and holy offerings eaten; religious festivities like Ramlila and Tajia were celebrated by all. Moneys were freely given for the construction of temples and mosques alike: Hindus contributed 75 per cent of the money for the construction of a mosque in Nausori. Christianity was embraced by some but often without the loss of prior cultural and religious practices. One of the key folk festivals, Holi, lost its erstwhile decorum and was celebrated rather ‘shamelessly’, while Christmas, as an extraordinary instance of cultural accommodation arising out of colonial ‘gazetted’ holidays, became the most important day of the year (83). In the social sphere, the reformist Arya Samajis began to establish schools.

As an educated and articulate man, Totaram Sanadhya got to know the progressive Methodist missionary, the Rev. J. W. Burton, with whom he debated Hindu theology. In spite of his slightly detached and puritanical stance, Sanadhya did, to some extent, become part of Fiji; he even married the daughter (Ganga Devi) of a friend. Ironically, though, it was marriage that triggered in him a desire to return home to India. Between the section dealing with his marriage and his return, there are a number of pages specifically devoted to Sanadhya’s understanding of the Fijian way of life. It has been remarked often enough that no Fiji Indian has written about native Fijians in any serious manner. Fiji Indian sociologists, historians, literary critics and writers, to a person, have not felt that Fijians were a legitimate object of scholarship. There are many reasons for this, and a defence of this neglect may be readily mounted, but even where Fiji Indians have discussed their own history it has rarely, if ever, been in the context of a Fijian rendition of either history or social practice. In devoting the pages that separate Fiji from his return to India to the indigenous Fijians (some twenty pages in all), Sanadhya makes a strong symbolic statement about the centrality of the Fijian in the *girmit* imaginary. In many ways these pages constitute a rare ethnographic survey of Fijian subjectivity from the point of view of the Indian outsider. The account remains, to the best of my knowledge, unsurpassed as an open, uninhibited and frank description of native peoples. It also shows the extent to which Sanadhya (and, one presumes, other Indians, too) learned the Fijian language, examples of which are given in his account.

The account begins with the usual blinkered reading of a different culture, but the honesty is clear from the start as Sanadhya does not hold back his criticism of the race: prone to excitement and anger, but also indolent and eager to borrow. But immediately after this comes praise for their communal solidarity, treatment of women and the aged, and especially of widows (who are given pride of place in village gatherings and are encouraged to remarry) – the latter of special concern to Sanadhya given the large numbers of widows who signed up for indenture. He comments on the complex social organization of Fijian village life, the prevalence of law and order and justice in it, and the role of village panchayats in the distribution of the fruits of labour. Indeed, the role of the village chief (selfless in his duty and without personal wealth
or property) is seen as a model to be used by village leaders back at home. The Fijians treated Indians as their own brothers and sisters and compared to white men often remarked about the similarity in the colour of their skin. They invited each other to weddings, and it was not uncommon to see Fijians participating in Indian festivals such as Ramlila and Tajia. Yet even then the idea of the foreigner, the vulagi, persisted; but this was as much because the indentured labourers themselves continued to see their stay in Fiji, even beyond their years of bondage, as temporary. The idea of India as home persisted throughout. The section on Fiji ends with Sanadhya’s reference to his gradual mastery of the Fijian language, his fondness for which is captured in the samples cited and translated.

And then, somewhat abruptly, after 21 years in Fiji, even as his testimonio demonstrates that ‘the diasporic body can only survive, and indeed must survive, byimagining, constructing, and ultimately becoming local’ (Trnka 1999: 50), Totaram Sanadhya departs for India. Sanadhya’s sojourn had been an interregnum of sorts, a period of banishment from which he returns reasonably well to do, though not particularly rich. He had kept in touch with his family back home, he sent them money, and his return was anticipated. Yet its suddenness strikes the reader because the narrative until then, especially with Sanadhya’s gradual engagement with the Fijian language, had suggested very strongly a sense of belonging to Fiji, a sense of the journey being final. But Sanadhya was not alone in returning to India. It is often overlooked that a third of all indentured labourers returned to India at some stage between 1885 and 1957. Many were defined as ‘rejects and incapables’ (Gillion 1962: 190), a number returned because of the free passage that was part of their contract, and a considerable number also paid their own way back. Much later in life many indentured labourers, many by now old and infirm, returned ‘home’ to die; but, during the period of indenture, for the ‘capables’ return was a matter of choice. Narratives of return, like those of arrival, are few; and once again Sanadhya’s text is invaluable. I want to trace this instance of a ‘history’ of return as a way of placing into relief the ‘dreams of return’ against the reality of encountering a motherland that had come to be an anchoring or homing point of the girmit ideology.

Somewhere, Frank Kermode once remarked, ‘the dreams of apocalypse, if they usurp waking thought, are the worst dreams’ (Hamburger 1972: 97). Apocalypse as fulfilment, revelation as return, haunted the girmitiyas, and Sanadhya’s return was closely linked to this haunting memory. When he returns it seems nightmare (which usurps waking thought on the plantations) is overtaken by the serenity of dream, and he notes that the moment of return was marked by the condition of amnesia as if he and his wife had never been to Fiji. But soon a different picture emerges. This picture may be interpreted on two levels: as Sanadhya’s personal autobiography and as a collective biography of the returnees generally. At the level of the personal, Sanadhya, who returns as a relatively well-to-do person, finds that indenure money gives him some prestige and power. But 21 years in a fragment culture marked by the gradual
The girmi ideology

collapse of caste and hierarchy and the creation of a relatively homogeneous form of social organization (including language and food) meant that he was constantly asked to declare that he had remained true to his caste, that his Brahminhood had remained inviolate, that his marriage had been conducted within the strictures of caste and religion. So there is a lengthy account of a panchayat called to look into the propriety of his plantation marriage, the morality of crossing the seas, the kālāpanī, and of eating with people of other caste on board a ship. His wife’s cooking habits are scrutinized by other women to see if she knew all the right rituals involved in preparing a meal. Although Sanadhya tends to defend himself against all these – even declaring that his Brahminhood was never polluted (which is patently false) – there is enough agitation in his prose to indicate that he missed the ‘peace’ of indenture life, its sense of egalitarianism and brotherhood. He seems to miss the special cadences of Fiji Hindi and Fijian; he seems to miss debates with co-religionists; he seems to miss generally the vibrancy of a fragment culture. In the village demands on his money by family and friends continue, his house is burgled, and he is constantly asked to explain his indenture past. Finally he leaves his village and flees to the town of Ferozabad.

Sanadhya returned to India; he survived; his world remained more or less intact, and he spent much time talking about indenture, its evils and why it should be abolished. Parts of his autobiography are published, in 1919 and 1922, but by then indenture itself had come to an end. The collective biography of the returnees, however, indicates a rather different encounter with homeland as a phenomenal reality. About this we need to say a word or two. Some, like Sanadhya himself, are re-absorbed in their erstwhile communities; many more, however, lose all their savings and become derelict. They hang around Calcutta docks, weak and infirm, in the hope of getting back to Fiji. The return rarely ever happened because a life of complete destitution back in India makes them less likely to pass the health test necessary for would-be labourers. Although Sanadhya recasts their lives as a moral fable, emphasizing the importance of returning rich and ensuring that any marriages undertaken during indenture should be properly conducted, the message is clear: the reality of return did not match the dreams of the homeland (Birbalsingh 1997: 68–9). When they returned, life was bad enough for many men; for women it was primarily a life of prostitution and poverty. Cases abound of married women with children left on the docks of Calcutta by their husbands who either were already married before they left for Fiji and now couldn’t possibly take their new wives back to their villages or had married out of caste and could never become part of their village any more. These women repeated their own prior lives as widows or rejected wives who had sought escape through indenture. Those born in Fiji and married to new arrivals replicated the horrid lives of their mothers. One women tells Sanadhya: ‘My husband brought me back from Fiji; he has now gone back to Fiji with the wife he had left behind’ (Sanadhya 1994: 144). These women (and men), writes Sanadhya more generally, have become a ‘new, unwanted caste in India’ (152).
In a sense it is the collective biography of the returnees that forms the basis of the many lectures that Sanadhya gives to reformist groups in India. One of these lectures – delivered between 1914 and 1919 – traces the history of indenture (coolie-pratha, as he calls it) and forms the concluding section of the book. In his account, the story of indenture begins with the work of recruiters who never explain the full conditions of indenture; nor the distances to be travelled. Labourers were ‘loaded’ in ships like animals; mocked and caned by the officers and given ‘dog biscuits’ to eat. Upon arrival the coolies were randomly sent to various estates. Removed from the new bonds of friendship created in the ships, a few committed suicide. Workers were paid a shilling (10 cents) per ‘task’. But since these tasks varied in difficulty (the terrain, weather, health and so on affected work) they took days to complete. Consequently it was uncommon for a labourer to earn more than 9 rupees (US$1.80) per month. The purchasing power of the rupee in Fiji was low, and few were able to save. The Colonial Sugar Refining (CSR) Company itself saw them simply as ‘implements of work’, subhuman and without dignity. The rape of women by young officers from Australia and New Zealand was not uncommon. It was not unusual to hear of the murder of these women by their husbands, although they themselves were not at fault. Sanadhya speaks about the importance of an Indian commission of inquiry into the evils of indenture, but by then the Indian government was already bent on abolishing the system as the last ship arrived in Fiji on 11 November 1916. Indenture formally came to an end in 1920.

Sanadhya’s document is unique and invaluable, but he was no poet; his language is laboured, and his emphasis, like that found in some Fiji Indian writers, far too centred on the self, as if writing was an engagement with the self and not an escape from it. We turn to a prose-poem on indenture from Fiji’s finest poet, Sudesh Mishra, for experience transformed into art.

my destiny was an arkathi with a tongue sweeter than sucrose, who told me a story as steep as the himalayas, and his images had the tang of rupees, so that two days later i was on pericles, hauling anchor in the calcutta of my diaspora, and india slipped through my fingers like silk, like silk it slipped through my fingers of three thousand seven hundred and forty eight girmityas, and many things were lost during that nautical passage, family, caste and religion, yet many things were also found, chamars found brahmins, muslims found hindus, biharis found marathis, so that at the end of the voyage we were a nation of jahajibhais . . . yet this newfound myth fell apart the moment we docked in nukulau, because the sahibs hacked our bonds with the sabre of their commands and took us away in dribs and drabs, rahim to navua, shakuntala to labasa, mahabir to nandi, and my lot was a stony acreage of hell in naitasiri, where I served the indenture of my perdition . . .

(Sudesh Mishra 2002a: 73)
Soon after the end of indenture, much of the revolutionary impetus of the fragment (as seen in Sanadhya’s narrative for instance) was gone. The Fiji colonial administration displaced the CSR Company as the key arbiter of Indian lives; events in the motherland transformed the Fiji Indian into a political subject; movements back and forth between Fiji and India meant that religious and cultural differences (between Hindus and Muslims, between Northerners and Southerners, between Sanatanis and Arya Samajis for instance) became a feature of the Indian diaspora. With peasant innocence the fragment saw political solutions in the abstract without recognizing that Fiji was not terra nullius, an empty space upon which one’s future hopes could be etched with ease. Unknown to it the *girmit* ideology faced a contrary definition of the nation-state, a definition that began with the colonial government’s desire to preserve a primordial Fijian identity through absolute ownership of the land (and hence, later, of the nation).

Initially, of course, the Pax Britannica, the remarkable colonial interregnum, ‘the miraculous peace of the colonial time’ (Naipaul 1979: 41), created just the right kind of stability for a post-indenture Indian community to flourish. The colonial order established the rule of law and the sanctity of property, as well as the principle of the right to self-rule. The democratic ideal, as the evidence so powerfully establishes, has to be read off against the social-life values of regeneration, utopianism and millenarian fulfilment embedded in the *girmit* ideology. In other words, the possibility of a democratic nation state would, if achieved, retrospectively make social sense. If Fiji Indians excelled in law, in politics, in education, it was because these were material means through which a historical memory could be simultaneously laid to rest and transcended, even erased. As if this was art, Fiji Indians fought wonderful political fights like a version of the Ramlila, and became immensely litigious. In *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), Naipaul looks at the mystique of law with reference to Biswas’s failure to *insuranburn* (‘insure and then burn’) his shop. In Cheddi Jagan’s *The West on Trial* (1980), and in Seewoosagur Ramgoolam’s *Our Struggle* (1982), both of which also begin with indenture in British Guiana (Guyana) and Mauritius respectively, the quest for democratic ideals is firmly stated throughout. In all the plantation-Indian diasporas (the old diaspora of classic capital) a ‘race’ dragged into modernity from parts of India unaffected by the great nineteenth-century reform movements saw a just nation state as the ‘sign’ of transcendence over an ideology.

The difficulty with what may be called democratic absoluteness or a belief in the self-evident link between democracy and a just society (on which the nation-state also hinges) is that liberal democratic principles may not be compatible with the principles of diversity and their recognition. In other words, it may be argued that there is nothing intrinsically contradictory between support of democratic ideals and variable and even racially discriminatory support of different cultures within a democratic polity. The ‘hidden and limiting presuppositions of our [liberal democratic] theories’, suggests Joseph H. Carens (2000: 5), distort the kinds of nativist defence of the two Fiji coups of 1987 and 2000: a native people should have an absolute right to the political control of
their country. Although Fiji had been ‘postcolonial’ since 1970 when it gained independence from Britain, the coups signalled, for the native Fijian, their moments of anti-colonial struggle because these coups re-defined what indigenous people meant by rights and the social democratic notion of the common good, both matters of faith for the Indian diaspora. Curiously enough, the moment of postcolonial affirmation could only happen with demonstrable claims of Fijian supremacy over an immigrant, albeit thoroughly Fiji-born, population. The case of Fiji thus poses some interesting contextual questions to a number of theories of difference. The first, as I have hinted, is postcolonial theory itself because the ‘native’ agitation takes its most profound revolutionary form not against an imperial power, but against a primarily subaltern class which had historically fought against injustice, first as indentured labourers and then as citizens of the state of Fiji. The second theory is the impartiality of democratic institutions. Post-May 1987 Fiji has made it quite clear that democratic institutions in the country will be neither impartial nor even-handed since the imperative of native rights will govern policy – a belief which led to the following critical qualification from the intellectually inclined vice-president of Fiji, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi: ‘To simply assert that once fundamental rights were all that needed to be asserted, left indigenous people vulnerable and unprotected’ (*Fiji Times* 24 July 2005). The third theory (among many others) is the theory of justice: Can there be a just society if the political culture of a nation must assume a two-tiered value of citizenship? The distinction between the ‘morally required’ (equal citizenship to Indo-Fijians) and the ‘morally permissible’ (special rights in favour of Fijian cultural preservation) becomes important. As late as 23 July 2005, the Fijian prime minister, Laisenia Qarase, continued to press this line of reasoning. He is reported as saying ‘most Fijians believed the events of 2000 were for indigenous rights and answering a call from the vanua [clan or region]. For Indians he said the coup of 2000 was simply a terrorist and law-breaking act’ (*Fiji Times*).

To change this political theatre of the absurd, what was necessary was the mobilization of the Indian as the real, landless underclass (which of course it was difficult to establish because of a slippage by which the visible success of Indian commerce was seen as the success of the Indian community as a whole). Failing that, what it required was individual sacrifice, the gift of death to their people by Indian politicians. Which raises the following questions: (a) When do we die for a political party? (b) When do we die for a nation? (c) When do we die for a cause? Diasporas, of course, refuse to die. And herein lies a question which may also be posed as a dilemma: Can diasporas be anything else but travellers, happy in their travel/travail; the nation-state simply an anchoring point for material advancement, and the homeland always something other than the land of our birth? If transience is our condition, if diasporas can reconstitute themselves wherever they are – in Suva or Sacramento, in Trinidad or Toronto, Mauritius or Melbourne – can diasporas die for a cause?

To grasp hold of a nation one has to lay claim to it, establish moments of heroism that are equally part of the nation’s history. The colonizer did this...
through brute force, through territorialization, through phallic power along with the musket – Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the USA are testimonials to that fact. The Fijians sought ‘blood credentials’ through participation in wars. The immensely influential Fijian high chief Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, when recruiting soldiers for the Second World War, declared: ‘Fijians will never be recognized unless our blood is shed first’ (Kelly and Kaplan 2001: 77). Further, as in the case of Fiji, there are always moments of heroic sacrifice at the behest of the nation (independent or not) that create the concept of a right to belong. In a sense, ‘blood sacrifice’, in the primordial sense of the phrase, is a necessary component of the right to claim the nation as one’s own. In its moment of postcolonial triumph, the nationalist Fijian government decided to build a war memorial close to Fiji’s Parliament Buildings to commemorate the achievements of Fiji’s only Victoria Cross winner, Corporal Sefanaia Sukanivalu, who was given the award in 1944 and whose remains are in Rabaul, in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea (Fiji Times 28 August 2005). The moment and the location of the memorial are crucial signifiers of the new definition of the idea of the ownership of the land being advanced in Fiji in the wake of its coup-ridden history of the past twenty years.

Does it follow that in matters of ‘blood sacrifice’ only those who have shaped a nation’s (prior) history through a war effort (the sacrifice in Gallipoli by Australians and New Zealanders, for instance) may be called upon to do so again? And, if this is so, is there not a definition of the (patriotic) citizen that coalesces with the group through whom the nation is represented? Without that legacy of a prior sacrifice the definition of the citizen in a multicultural polity (in real terms) will always be asymmetrical. There are two important messages here. The first is the message of an inherently unequal definition of citizenship based on the grounds of prior sacrifice (which may be extended to include the sacrifice to ‘tame’ the land, a claim internalized by white settlers in settler dominions from the US to Australia, but from which Fiji Indians have been excluded). The second is the need to trace actual social contacts in any theorizing of the nation. In other words, the matter of jurisdictional rights requires close examination of ways in which groups have interacted historically on a case-by-case basis. The diaspora, more passive, created economies, perhaps even saved native peoples, races from extinction, but never affected the imaginary of the peoples with whom they lived. From the Fijian perspective, in Fiji, therefore, the Indian diaspora failed to get ‘recognition’ in Charles Taylor’s sense of the word.

In our reprise of key events in the recent history of Fiji we have drawn attention to the failure of the ‘political’ solution to the girmit ideology, for it seems that the democratic ideal, linked to a postcolonial liberationist struggle, was one way in which indenture and its traumatic memory could be laid to rest. Although the Indian diaspora has achieved a degree of political triumph, in Mauritius most assuredly, in Guyana and Trinidad more ambiguously, the built-in millenarianism of the girmit ethos remains incomplete. In spite of their long presence in the old plantation diaspora, they are not deemed to be
self-evidently the face of the nation. These contradictions are best-discussed through the literature of the Indian diaspora.

The ideology of the aesthetic

I want to begin this section with a reference to four writers whose writings collectively cover some 30 years of Fijian postcolonial history. They are: Satendra Nandan, Mohit Prasad, Raymond Pillai and Sudesh Mishra. A fifth, and arguably the most important for the thesis I advance, is Subramani, to whose comic-epic *Daukā Purāṇ* I shall return at the end of this book. We have read the *girmit* ideology as a structure (of feeling) that grew out of the experience of the plantation diaspora. One of its key constituents was a sense of betrayal, a sense that the promises of fulfilment (by recruiters who entered the *girmit* imaginary as ‘duplicitous arkhatis’ against innocent *girmitiyās*) were never met. It led to a fossilized sense of reverse millenarianism as though the promises had already been met in the homeland or would have been met had we never left. The semantic restructuring of the *girmit* experience with homeland idioms hence reinforces the idea of a fossilized fragment seeking renewal through a continued re-fossilization of the self. The structure is used with similar nostalgic referent by the Fiji Indian poet Satendra Nandan, who writes:

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youth I lost here, and grace
i gave to this island place.
what more than a man’s age
can one give to history’s outrage? . . .
i have lived this exile
more gloriously than rama
and built kingdoms, you may find,
nobler than ayodhya,
in my ancient eternal mind!
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(1985: 52–3)

These are the words of a ghost who speaks to the poet, a kind of spectral Leech-gatherer whose toils are now a matter of retrospect. He is the original *girmitiyā* who speaks on behalf of those who participated in the first journey. He writes history through the perennial narrative of the banishment of Rama, seeing his exile in Fiji in terms of the epic hero’s own quest to recover his wife Sita and return to princely Ayodhya. But the precursor text is not available in all its totality largely because the return has to be censored. For wasn’t it so that upon his return Rama has to reject Sita, Mother India herself? Only one half of the epic, the story of banishment, is to be invoked, and it is the living in exile (‘more gloriously than rama’) that is the link to the epic text. This poem is the centre-piece of much of Nandan’s poetry and rightly so because it locates a poetic vision in an ‘authentic history [that] cannot be written / with words from living mouths’ (61). So if authentic history is not lived history, the history of actual
labour, that is, *girmît* as labour, then it has to be located in *girmît* as ideology, in a belief system that is sustained through a prior memory in which history is constructed in an ‘ancient, eternal mind’. Upon listening to the tale of the Leech-gatherer, Wordsworth, whose mind had hitherto been filled with ideas of death (of the promising poet Chatterton) and madness (of all poets), finds that the apocalyptic tendencies of the romantic imagination may be arrested when one is reminded of selfless labour. For Nandan, the conclusion is far less redemptive: first an apostrophic forgiveness from his forebears, then a request to his children not to forget the experience of the passage itself:

{o my father’s fathers
  what forgiveness is there for me?
{o my children’s children
  listen to the voices from *syria*
  drowning the silence of the sea!}

(54)

The sentences turn inwards, and as we look back they anticipate V. S. Naipaul’s Nobel lecture: ‘We looked inwards; we lived out our days; the world outside existed in a kind of darkness; we inquired about nothing’. One needs to hold on to the experience of indenture, as material fact, in ways perhaps more ‘concretely’ than Nandan, or else, as Sartre once observed, ‘[literature] wilts if it is reduced to innocence, to song’ (Sartre 1974: 13–14). Against this we note that Sudesh Mishra makes a more assertive intervention in a poem in his *Tandava* collection:

> Girmitya, my maker
> Your journey
> Has broken my heart.

(1992: 13)

But it is in the vision of the young poet Mohit Prasad, in a poem in a series about mangoes, that we enter into the experience of the journey as an understated fabliau. The sea is calm, the sails no longer fluttering. An indentured labourer sees a woman, her eyes are seductive, her gaze tempting, and desire erupts: ‘I know I will see you again/in a grove of mangoes’. The grove is yet to come, for the land is as yet unnamed, its flora and fauna alien. But desire makes up for the lack, and the journey bearable. Mohit Prasad’s poem does not seek ‘forgiveness’ as Nandan’s does possibly because he, Nandan, feels that the elegy he has written cannot capture the original pain. And unlike Sudesh Mishra the legacy of the journey has not broken the poet’s heart in twain. In Mohit Prasad’s poem the journey is envisioned as that of a traveller, the slave Bomma of Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land*.

> I caress an empty thought
> as I clean out a brass plate
of thin dhal and broken rice bits,
I am carrying a mango seed
to plant at the end of this voyage.
(2001: 47)

The woman’s gaze and the mango seed carry a narrative of creative possibilities as signs both of the renewal of life and the stamping on the landscape of a flora that is meaningful. The labourer’s proud secret (‘carrying a mango seed’) is captured by Mohit Prasad through the present continuous form of the simple present in the original Hindi. The use of the present continuous carries the future in the present and holds out a certain kind of promise. It is this promise and the degree to which indentured labourers transformed the landscape, ‘naturalized’ the alien, re-visioned the nation in terms of their own experience and believed that theirs, too, was one of the founding narratives of the nation, that underpin the trauma of loss that comes with subsequent political upheavals and denial of the diaspora’s legitimacy. In the texts that I discuss below, mangoes are no longer eaten with the same relish; they enter into a different, more cynical semantic, and offer a different, less elegiac, mode of textual mediation.

Raymond Pillai’s Fiji Hindi play Adhuuraa Sapnaa [Shattered Dreams] was first produced at the Victoria University of Wellington in November 1993. Although the play is set in the Fiji of the mid-70s, its discourse is strategically keyed into a post-1987 coup Fijian history. There are two centres to the narrative here: the first is possession of land (and the idea of permanence via ownership of land/house is a crucial signifier of diasporic lives – a piece of earth that one can claim/reclaim as one’s home is an enduring motif); the second is betrayal. The idea of ‘betrayal’, simple and almost Christian in its symbolism, has two lines of flight: loss of trust between husband and wife; and failure of promise between the landowner and the landless. Yet, as one reads the original play in Fiji Hindi and in Raymond Pillai’s own English translation, one begins to detect other lines of divergence, other lines of flight, this time in the body of the languages themselves. In the Fiji Hindi original the Indian diaspora seems to have re-constituted or re-defined itself through a language that has many of the characteristics of an anti-language, a secret at times funny and disruptive language created by a community as a means of communication among themselves and as a means of defining their exclusiveness. Through this language life-worlds are created that allow living in this world possible through laughter. For the native informant of the language, the laughter erupts in unlikely places, sometimes even undercutting as a performative act the text’s more constative content. Here is a passage in the Fiji Hindi original and in English translation. At this point in the play Sambhu, the civil servant turned farmer, recalls his first encounter with English poetry (‘Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle, / The cow jumped over the moon’).

Sambhu: agar ii duniya me aise howe sake, tab to jaruur gaai sake muun ke uppar se kros maare, jaruur pussii sake vaailin par chun chhoRe.
Sambhu: If such things can happen in this world, then surely a cow can leap over the moon, surely a cat can play a tune on the violin.

(Pillai 2001: 200/260)

Both are framed as fulfilments of a condition: the ‘if such and such a thing is possible, then surely . . .’ argument not uncommon in simple logic. But, whereas the second simply gestures towards the likely fulfilment of certain ‘acts’ under certain circumstances, the original Fiji Hindi releases a laughter, a hilarity, a subversive social semiotic, that is embedded in the mode of expression itself. It arises through two means. The first is through a rewriting of standard Hindi (where the effect is the same as that in the English translation) in the demotic. The second is through heteroglossic mimicry of the English language. It is not just that ‘a cow can leap over the moon’, it is the way in which the language bears, within the demotic (which has already signalled an ‘incivility’ or disrespect towards formal Hindi), the phonetically cadenced English words ‘muun’ (moon), ‘cros’ (cross), ‘pussii’ (pussy-cat), ‘vaailin’ (violin) and ‘chun’ (tune). What the original carries is a forceful statement about self-representation in language and by extension a total ease with the culture that encompasses it. More significantly, the Fijian landlord Jona speaks in this language, too. Apart from representing a mode of accommodation that few diasporas anywhere have been able to achieve, the language in fact has become part of what may be called a Fiji English. In a sense the possibilities of the carnival, of laughter embedded in the language itself, have made Fiji Indian diasporic lives liveable, certainly in postcolonial Fiji. But comedy even when carried in language does not redeem; the bitter irony of life rendered as laughter surfaces as Pillai’s play shows little hope for the future or an unqualified belief in the vitality of life. Against the self-evident force of the language, the narrative once again despairs and presages Sambhu’s act of suicide. Suicide, a legacy of the original girmit when, too, the incidence of suicide was very high, has now become a sign of Indian despair in contemporary Fiji. In the years since the May 2000 coup some 200 Fiji Indians have committed suicide, making their suicide rate one of the highest per head of any community in the world.

It is, then, curious that in spite of the self-evident ease with which the social operates – the social here rendered as living in a world of one’s own making where witchdoctors or ojhaas act as diviners of the future – the word girmit turns up whenever the question of legitimacy arises. And here one is conscious of legitimacy as indicating belonging to the land. In Fiji, where 83 per cent of the land is Fijian-owned, land tenure has had a very special meaning for the Fiji Indian; the fear of land being ‘reserved’ (that is, reverting to the original landowners for their own use) has been a difficult political issue in the country, and much unease between the two dominant races in the country has grown out of it. For the farming community in Fiji (and for Fiji Indians generally), the word ‘reserve’ has tragic connotations as it implies a kind of finality, an end to years of labour to till the land and make it productive. And it is here that ‘reserve’ once again enters into the emotional field of girmit because central to girmit is the idea of labour as being in itself
The girmit ideology 43

redemptive. When one follows the logic of the narrative, Sambhu’s act of suicide, although dramatically connected to the discovery of his young wife’s infidelity, has a much longer cause, and that cause is Jona, the Fijian landlord who declares that his land would be reserved. Sambhu had left his job as a government clerk to fulfil the girmit dream, the dream of the self-sufficient farmer. But that does not happen, although he sees himself as being the Fijian’s equal and is not unwilling to claim his superiority over him.

In an illuminating passage Sambhu refers to girmit as the ever-present experience, as a term so intrinsically connected to a particular kind of labour through which the Fiji Indian constantly renews his right to the land. The use of girmit ‘presences’ the Fiji Indian, it defines his being as someone rather special; it is an experience from which other Fiji Indians (the merchant class, Bombaiyas as they are derogatively called, or other more recent free migrants from India) would be forever excluded. So Sambhu declares:

Well we should have done our girmit, served as indentured labourers. Then we too could have said to the Fijians, ‘Fiji is our country. It’s we who made Fiji.’

(Pillai 2001: 260)

And again:

Tambi: But we did girmit here. The Bombaiya crowd didn’t.
Sambhu: Ah, now you’ve come to the point! The Bombaiyas didn’t serve girmit. And we didn’t do it either. True our elders did so, that’s why they had the right to stay on in Fiji. But what right have we got? Until we pour out our sweat into this land, we can never claim we have any rights here.

(Pillai 2001: 298)

In terms of this declaration, the move from government clerk to farmer repeats the girmit experience as Sambhu wishes to reclaim the country through an act of labour, a labour that would repeat an earlier moment, the original moment of arrival. Yet this replication, given the political reality of Fiji (in spite of the mid-70s historical setting of the play), can repeat the earlier tragedy only as a suicidal act, an act that transforms tragedy into farce. In this respect the text allegorically demonstrates the necessity as well as the impossibility of replicating the foundational act of girmit, because the replicated act always remains incomplete, an adhuuraa (literally ‘incomplete, unfinished’) sapnaa (‘dream’). Sambhu’s metonymical connection between labour and girmit is lost on both Minla, his wife, and Mausi, the elderly neighbour. For Minla girmit as slavery is different from labour as mehnat (work). For Mausi girmit is in the past, a historical moment to be archived, not a traumatic moment or even an ideology triggered by a later crisis (the Fijian claims to native rights in the context of the history of the play’s moment of production, not of its histoire). For Pillai the adhuuraa sapnaa extends the story of the incomplete
The *girmit* ideology

journey, the latter even more incomplete given the divergent paths of the two races in recent years even when in the national imaginary the Indians (as copious drinkers of *yagona*, as speakers of Fijian, as indeed part of the Fijian landscape) are so crucial to its being. In the Fiji Hindi version the point about difference is made more effectively by the Fijian Jona:

kai viti kai India naii sako ek rastaa pakaro
Fijians and Indians cannot walk the same road together.

(Pillai 2001: 211/271)

For Sambhu (and for Pillai, too, one thinks) the divergence, the following of two paths, also shows a failure to grasp the original meaning of *girmit* as labour and its transformation into an ideology of an absence that cannot be grasped, as a sublime moment of the failure to represent to consciousness a loss. Matters do not get any better if the Indian continues to be unwanted.

Hindustani log ke sab ke maage gaaR me laat lage. lekin fir bhi nahii sudharegaam hamlog jahaa bhii jaay ke bastaa, ham log bawaal karte rahtaa, aur laat khaate rahtaa. daliddar kaam kare ke aadat hamlog ke khuun me hai.

We Indians need a good kick in the arse! But even then we won’t learn. No matter where we settle, we go on creating trouble. The habits of the wretched are in our blood.

(Pillai 2001: 255/315)

‘No matter where we settle’, says Sambhu – and (re)settling is a theme in this play throughout – ‘we go on creating trouble’. Canada is the escape route for the non-professional Indian middle class, thanks to the Canadian government’s generous immigration policies. But in the play’s reading, unless *girmit* is understood and the value of labour (which defined the Fiji Indian and created the conditions for a more egalitarian Indian world-order in Fiji) internalized, we would fail to fulfil the promise made during indenture. For the *girmit* ideology to end, *girmit* has to be internalized as labour, and life itself read in terms of that labour. This is very different from Satendra Nandan’s epic nostalgia and melancholic celebration of the past. Here the loss of the original meaning of *girmit* (not as bondage or indenture or travel or even as a defining [false] consciousness) holds the key to the loss of the claim to the land since labour is not renewed any more and the ‘Bombaiya fallah’s’ entrepreneurial culture becomes an Indian diasporic dream no longer linked to the *girmit* experience.

Pillai completed this play elsewhere, in New Zealand, having drafted the first act as early as 1977. Sudesh Mishra, our next exemplary author but from whose works we have already quoted, reflected on the coup from within Fiji, and wrote *Ferringhi* (2001a). The title of this play is the Fiji Hindi word *firaangi* (itself derived from the Hindi *phirna*, to walk, to wander), a word that connotes the charming otherness of the peripatetic traveller, not quite the for-
eigner nor the pardeśī (pradeśī, the romantic lover in absence and subject of the bidesiyā songs) nor indeed the Fijian vulagi which in the national song isa isa vulagi lasa dina is the departing subject of a fond farewell. So ‘ferringhi’ is part troubadour, part hawker, part flâneur, part the unsuspecting visitor who arrives at dinner time and part the distracted figure seen counting cars on the old Rewa Bridge. Where girmit connotes the harshness of indenture, ‘ferringhi’ imparts the infections of comedy, transforming girmit into carnival.

The centrepiece of laughter in Fiji is the talanoa around the tanoa, the kava bowl. Talanoa/tanoa echo each other, dragging one into the other through euphonic and socially semiotic (not etymological) connections. Talanoa, or anecdotal discussion (discussion not centred on analysis of events but on recounting tales of the ‘once upon the time’ or ‘did you hear about the woman’ variety), may be seen as a discourse genre in its own right, with its own rules and regulations. The evenings following my own father’s funeral in 1989 (Mishra 1989) were marked by talanoa, aimless chatter (vaka-talanoa-taka) around the tanoa that introduced a strange, discordant counter-narrative (an unacted anecdotal narrative) into the solemnity of the religious recitation taking place elsewhere in the house. In Sudesh Mishra’s play anecdotal narratives are drawn upon to create form; the dramatic experience (enunciation and response) growing out of the anecdotes themselves. Anecdotes require a storyteller, a tusitala, the Samoan word used fondly for Robert Louis Stevenson that Mishra uses to give the storyteller a distinctively Pacific meaning. But, whereas anecdotes of the tusitalas were finally life-affirming, those of Ferringhi are dark narratives of the mind, narratives that can only become parables not so much of identity (as Shakespeare’s later romances were) but parables of trauma where history itself is rendered as trauma. The 1987 coup in Fiji made memory and recall all the more important because, as John O’Carroll has remarked, ‘memory [can defeat] amnesia’ (2001: 320). But because of this – memory’s triumph over amnesia – O’Carroll sees the fable in positive terms. The text, however, says something rather frightening and foreboding; the text implies the end of the anecdotal narrative as positive, redemptive, social enunciation; indeed, after the coup there can be no talanoa because storytelling itself is now a history of trauma, a dark comedy.

John O’Carroll makes the important observation that this play is about storytelling itself; it is a ‘drama of narration’ (2001: 322). Although he explains what narration means to the key players in this drama, he only silently glosses what is obvious in his reading: that narration itself is story; in other words, narration (discours) is histoire. When narration is only discours, histoire collapses into the folds of language; as presentational process it ceases to have a history different from the process itself. So, in Ferringhi, discours cannot be reconstituted, retrospectively, into an histoire, into the presented world of linear history; it is as if the signifiers no longer have their signifieds, as if the letter in a round-robin process simply returns to itself. The storyteller, as Walter Benjamin tells us after a German saying, is the man from afar who tells his tale (1973: 84). The power of the play – and O’Carroll does not exaggerate when
he calls it ‘extraordinary’ – resides in this slicing off of the *histoire* from the *girmit* experience, which now centres around the synchronic here-and-now temporality of the storyteller. Post-1987 Fiji saw the departure of some 30,000 Fiji Indians, many with not much more than their possessions packed in a single suitcase. Homes were locked, keys left with neighbours or with creditors. This departure was a repeat of an earlier one, many years before, of the traumatic, the originary, foundational departure from India. Sudesh Mishra’s play is written in the context of trauma as recall, not unlike Walter Benjamin’s reference in *The Arcades Project* to an awakening that went on in the life of the individual as in the life of generations (1999: 388).

In *Ferringhi* five people palaver around the kava bowl. They are urban people – a Chinese, two Fijians, two Indians. Their banter is about events transformed into situations of laughter. So the first words in the play, ‘You bullshit’, already insinuates a completed anecdote prior to the first scene which is then repeated to confirm that what was said is not ‘bullshit’. The general bonhommie and recognition of the social contexts of the anecdote stipulate a community of speakers united through a common linguistic register of the ‘urban street slang of Suva’ (O’Carroll 2001: 322). That this register now also incorporates the Hindi demotic in Fiji, giving the latter a cross-cultural legitimacy, is evident in the single word ‘chalau’ uttered by Pumpkin. The ritual of kava drinking around the *tanoa* presupposes the use of Fijian words. Here the Fiji Hindi demotic ‘chalau’ (‘pass the cup’ or ‘pass around’) used by Pumpkin (a Fijian?) implies the incorporation of the Indian into the body of Fijian culture. Even after the coup the kava bowl remained the centre of the social. As a pan-Fijian ritual it was not seen as an alien mode of the inter-personal – after all, it was around the kava bowl that relations sat to mourn my father’s death. They, too, told anecdotes, as we see in *Ferringhi*’s opening scene or *lila*, as Mishra prefers to call all his scenes, since *lilā* is both performance and life-as-play; *lilā* is *kri-dati*, the play of gods, linking it with *maya*, the world as illusion. In Fijian ‘lila’ is a relatively rare word used to refer to a long illness, especially of the consumptive variety. But something seems to have snapped, something is out of joint. The disruption in the anecdotal frame of the *talanoa* occurs with the arrival of Puglu, part Shiva, part satyr, part savage. Gradually the lives of the other people sitting around the kava bowl begin to emerge, initially as fragments for sure, but charged with meaning. Seru is an ex-soldier who has returned after his stint as part of the Fijian peacekeeping force in Lebanon. Part fundamentalist Christian, part nationalist (but afraid of storytelling), these references to Seru’s past introduce an uneasy element in the play as suddenly stories are not simply matters of anecdote but also of identity: who speaks, for whom and about what? The new element prepares the way for the entry of Ferringhi in the next scene (Lila Two). His opening words are at once the language of Dylan Thomas, of the lead characters in the Peter Brook version of the *Mahābhārata* and of Tiresias who, too, had ‘foresuffered all’. His prose is extravagant, poetic, alien, introducing what can only be seen as a *différance* in the system of signification. He speaks poetry in his set-pieces, and urban slang in his conversation with the
other characters. Both, the poetic and the demotic, combine after memory, as nostalgia, as recall, is broken, the markets have been vandalized by rioters, and the fear of yet another likely departure recalled (chal urdh ja re panchi/ke ab ye desh huwa begana, ‘fly away yet again little bird for this land [desh] is once again alien’):

When they leave, the maarkit change; no colours, no forms, jus subdued voices in a smoked-out world. Nothing to see, nothing to locate. Once a carnival, now a world the tint of fear and resignation. I go split after that. (Mishra 2001a: 345)

Once the spell is broken, once carnival, the basis of laughter, is overtaken by history, the basis of realism, once Seru’s other voice, the voice of the nationalist, has been released (under the influence of Ferringhi whose stories ‘full of lasu’ [lies] ‘get him’), memory surfaces as traumatic anecdotes, the humour becomes darkish. It is then that one hears of the ‘second girmit’ (352) from the figure of the girmitiya who wants to tell his history/story (356), and through Ferringhi’s projection of voices from the past. And these references to a second girmit are located in a new time, the time after the first coup of May 1987, as if girmit time is now overtaken by coup time, and the latter will be the time of the new postcolonial subject, cagey and unheroic like the 3rd Man who lies behind the sofa for fear that a stray bullet may hit him. This third man will be the voice of the new history:

Aray chutiya, if I die who’s going to write our story? (Mishra 2001a: 373)

who then adds:

Future? In the future I shall migrate to write a classic account of my trauma here. I already have a title: The Chundered Ghee, or How to Lose an Island and Gain a Continent. (Mishra 2001a: 374)

In the hands of this ‘good Minister’, Sudesh Mishra suggests, the concept of ‘trauma’ itself is trivialized; it is instrumentalized so as to cash in on liberal sympathies elsewhere: ‘I shall migrate. . .’ The ‘classic account’ written elsewhere is the kind of fatuous, insincere writing that is not about the trauma itself (as Sudesh Mishra and Raymond Pillai’s plays are) but is an extension of precisely the mercenary, self-centred trivializing of other people’s histories that diaspora writing always resists. So Mishra’s play Ferringhi also suggests abuse of storytelling especially when the teller’s ego becomes the centre of the stories told, and the self’s investment in trauma theory is a calculated ploy to substitute the man behind the sofa for those for whom memory itself has been lost: ‘The nation suffered amnesia for six weeks,’ says a voice. In John O’Carroll’s
argument, Sudesh Mishra’s play tries to contain this amnesia by once again making memory the centre of experience, for without memory (or memorial reconstruction) even trauma cannot be recalled.

My nani sold peanuts at Westend Theatre. She’d light vesi logs at four in the afternoon and roast unshelled nuts in a wok filled with black sand. I’m seven and I see the sweat beading her forehead and each bead perishing in the fire, one by one, and her hordhini flaring in the heat and I, seven, begin to tell, as they fall one after another, that suffering has a history and that every story is a quest beyond suffering. Yes, I know why she sat on her box outside the derelict theatre and heard men and women detonate nuts like grenades between their teeth, scattering shrapnel at her feet when the show began, lost in their own celluloid dreams, while she trudged home under a sky blotched with stars, day after day after day, till one night they found her sitting on the box and the show had ended and it had rained.

(377–8)

‘It’s the only story,’ says Ferringhi and adds, ‘every story I tell is a variation of that story’ (378). The teller tells this story, strategically nuanced for each occasion; its significance varied with each new context, but the story remains the same. The story is about what Pillai’s Sambhu called the need for girmit labour, but here in the story of the peanut vendor the materiality of historical memory connects with the metaphysical idea of self-less action, karmaphalatyāga, the idea of action without consequences: ‘And do not think of the fruit of action …
/ So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna/On the field of battle,’ wrote T. S. Eliot, recalling the great Hindu text (1963: 211). And this is what affects Seru, sometime truant, sometime voice of the coup master, who says ‘we borrowed from others without reflection’ and he must appease his own ‘forgotten (precolonial) gods’ (389). But we don’t know if the acts of atonement will have the same meaning in the new temporality, the ‘Bakwas Time’, the ‘timepass time’, the irreverent time (371) of the post-coup. The anecdotal narrative about the peanut vendor, the endless tales of Ferringhi, will have meaning only when history is recognized and when action overtakes meditation. Instead the new mother, Puglu, is named Maya, not the complex principle of illusion that co-exists with Brahman and makes the world of Prakrit, of nature, possible, but rather Maya as the harlot, Maya as she is reconfigured in the degraded epic of the Ramlila based on the girmit text par excellence, the Rāmāyaṇa of Tulsidas (c.1576–8), Maya who is connected with gold and treachery (kanak kāmnī), the stuff of which beguiling dreams are made. This is no Maya that subtends dualist Samkhya philosophy; this is Maya as the figure that makes epic rememoration impossible. It is Maya as extensively glossed by the young Fiji Indian poet Mohit Prasad in a poem of that name: ‘Maya is architect … banshee … cockatrice … wailing … lust … talking’ (2001: 24–5). And this is where Sudesh Mishra’s powerful yet painful play connects with memory as trauma, memory as recall that transforms the labour of girmit into fetish, and loses its value as redemptive ideal.
Unlike Pillai, Mishra eschews realism, or at least is aware of the dangers of an uncritical mimeticism when it comes to identity politics: the spectator is taken in by the verisimilitude and loses a key element of artistic modality, its power to mediate reality. Looking back at Brecht, Soyinka, Kureishi and Salman Rushdie, Mishra brings together divergent temporalities, linguistic registers, high and low mimetic modes, to create national allegories of a disturbing kind. In these allegories the Fijian world is not one closed space; it is a space that is also a social product that inducts inner experience into physical space. And, as with Bataille, for whom, in Henri Lefèvre’s words, ‘the entirety of space – mental, physical, social – is apprehended tragically’ (1995: 20), so, too, in Mishra’s play space in a hyperreal rendition of it, is structured to re-create an ‘in-betweenness’ around an alternative scanion of temporality. In The International Dateline (2001b), his play on space and time, Mishra collapses the International Dateline (which artificially creates coherent national time zones and may be moved) and the 180th meridian (which is a fixed longitudinal line dividing yesterday and today or today and tomorrow) so that the fixed meridian is at once a cartographical point of reference and a time zone that nation states around the meridian may shift at will. Extended to a conceit, the International Dateline becomes the twilight zone of possibilities, the zone where time is neither one nor the other, neither day nor night, like the twilight zone of the Narasingha avatar, the zone of improbable coincidences and confl ation of identities, the space that reproduces, since it syncopates time, presencing national histories as simultaneously trauma and laughter. ‘Symmetry or Schizophrenia?’ questions the narrator of this play (454) and then proposes to lay bare a tale that reflects the split as a mise-en-abyme structure of endless reflections. The International Dateline is an immensely creative play that uses the imaginary space of the Dateline to draw many of the anxieties of modernity in the Pacific together; to show how the perceived tranquillity of the island nations is already exploded by terrorism and drug trafficking. Yet in all this it exploits this ambiguous, this indecipherable space to speak of identity itself as being processual, identity as sandhyā, as a twilight zone, within which the good (the utilitarian democratic ideal) is located:

That goodness descends neither at day nor at night, neither as man nor beast, neither in the house nor outside. That goodness materializes in the verge between moments, spaces and beings. Neither one nor the other, it is the irreducible third.

(509)

So home, the space that one wishes to define unproblematically, the place to which one finally belongs, is accordingly an ‘overrated concept’ (509). Bihari the shopkeeper, part Fijian, part Hindu, part Muslim, part Australian, part Spanish, part Chinese and part whatever other ethnic group one can think of, consoles the elderly farmer Mungroo whose son Ananta, heartbroken after the coup, had put ‘hissel up in Ujjland [New Zealand] with that Mamy deerborcee [white divorcee]’ (459): ‘He probably feels freed from
the bhoja [weight] of all that’s gone on here since Leonidas [the first indenture ship to Fiji]."

How to free oneself from the weight of departure and the dreams of apocalypse constitutes one of the key elements of the diasporic imaginary. For our reading of the Indian diasporic imaginary the *girmit* ideology has special significance for the old Indian diaspora of classic capitalism. Although there are significant limitations inasmuch as the archive for the construction of the *girmit* ideology has been primarily Fiji Indian material, I do wish to stress, with some confidence, that the *girmit* ideology has been a significant organizing structure in the lives of the (old) plantation Indian diaspora generally. There is a coda, a corrective or a qualification from a related quarter which is necessary to point out. It comes from the works of the Malaysian Indian (Tamil) writer K. S. Maniam. In Maniam’s short story ‘Arriving’ (1995: 7–20) the key word is the Malay ‘*pendatang*’. It is a word that means ‘arrivals, illegals, boat-people’ or simply unwanted immigrants. For Krishnan, a second- or third-generation Indian in Malaysia, Mat’s perfunctory use of the word (‘You *pendatang*!’) – even if amicably directed towards him – had been unnerving for, yes, he thought ‘their great-grandfathers were *pendatangs*. Some of their grandfathers were *pendatangs*. Their fathers were not *pendatangs*. They’re not *pendatangs*’ (1995: 7).

Thirty years earlier he had bought a corner terrace house for $20,000, a considerable sum then. The house was his home; where the house stood was his nation, he belonged, and his origin, as Indian, was irrelevant. But when an otherness is invoked, when a difference, a lack of unqualified belonging signalled, a person’s identity is ‘set adrift by [a] new uncertainty’ (10). It is as if a trauma is triggered, memory released, the repressed returns, as if the voice of grandmother Periathai, the madness and suicide of Ravi’s father Naina (Kannan) in his earlier novel *The Return* (1993b; first published in 1981) shadows his being. For there was an arrival, a ship that is part of his historical memory, though not of his Malaysian identity. Krishnan recalls:

> ‘The ship stank of human dung,’ his father’s words came to him, ‘and we, the human cattle, floated above that odour, towards our new land.’

He tried hard to recall his father’s memories of his voyage out to Malaysia but his memory was choked with some strange obstruction. Krishnan lay in that region between water and land trying to pull away from the matted, dark intrusion, but his determination seemed to fail. Yes, it had been his determination that had kept him innocent of his father’s experiences. He had decided, when he became aware of his budding consciousness, not to be influenced by other people’s memories and nostalgia. He clawed at familiarity. But he only floated, set adrift by this new uncertainty, towards an unfamiliar landfall.

(Maniam 1995: 10)

The whiff of uncertainty, the denial of one’s sense of belonging, the recognition that Malaysia had been part only of a ‘familiar temporariness’, transforms
The gurmit ideology

The familiar into the alien. The morning ceases to dawn as ‘dew-and-soil soaked grass’. Instead he catches ‘a whiff of rotten sewage’, notices that the light was stark and harsh. The surrounding houses now remind him of cracks and unsteadiness, not of solidity and timelessness. And yet there is the shopkeeper Ah Ho, resilient, defiant, unaffected by life’s cruel vicissitudes.

Krishnan’s crisis of identity and self-awareness is severe. Mat’s cruel accusation of ‘pendatang’ had hurt until a moment of epiphanic dream cures. There are those men, historyless, who move with the current of history; behind them is nothing, before them everything (17). The past could kill, and did kill; the future had to be fronted ‘without dismay, without fear’ (18). ‘Pendatang. Pendatang. Pendatang.’ The word takes Krishnan ‘into himself’, takes him ‘into the beyond’ (18). Diasporic questions about the political (individual rights) and the personal (the accusation of non-belonging) no longer discourage since the diaspora always arrives, keeps arriving, and is not without dignity because of it. One never reaches, one continually aspires, for to reach is to die; to reach is to repeat (the earlier trauma of arrival), to complete and not to grow, points made as well in Rani Manicka’s novel The Rice Mother (2002). Pendatang, arrival, to Maniam is the condition of diasporic being. The short story ‘Arriving’ began with the image of a crow ‘scavenging at a pile of garbage’; it ends with the image of the crow again but without the metaphor of flight. For, whereas earlier the crow had flown to the shelter of the uncontaminated nearby rain tree, now the crow lingers on the garbage, ‘pecking away at the wastes of history, trying to salvage’. Krishnan’s consciousness salvages through action, transforming the accusation of arrival itself into the redemptive condition of diaspora. Arriving, of course, does not totally obliterate memory of one’s past. Although his first semi-autobiographical novel The Return does not make explicit any longing for a lost homeland, there are nevertheless degrees of unease with matters that are new or with the uncertainty of land tenure. Newness takes a cultural twist when the Tamil teacher Murugesu’s familiar stories (‘Murugesu tied most of these stories to people and incidents we knew’ [1993b: 21]) are replaced by Miss Nancy the colonial English teacher’s stories about white boys and girls in Anglo-European tales (the Boy in the Alphabet, associated in Ravi’s mind with Ernie of ‘Dobbin and Ernie’, ‘didn’t rise out of the page as Sivam, the village lout, had done in the Tamil Primer’ [24]). It may be said that grandmother Periathai’s sense of ennui, of exhaustion and father Kannan (Naina’s) madness and eventual suicide are linked to the failure to belong to Malaysia by owning land. In his short story ‘Haunting the Tiger’ (1996: 37–46) failure by Muthu to connect with the new, common culture and tenacious adherence to his Indian past leads to an unfulfilled life. Maniam has referred to two kinds of diasporic identification: the way of the tiger and the way of the chameleon. In his essay ‘The New Diaspora’ (1997) Maniam seemingly endorses both ways but casts his vote in favour of the chameleon because, as he argues, the way of the tiger means identifying with a nationalist consciousness, a move that really replaces one monolithic ideology (the colonial) with another that simply replicates its totalizing agenda. The chameleon, replacing an old skin with a new
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one through molting, dispensing with singular narrative forms, is the meta-
aphor of the new diaspora, multiple, selective, hybrid and in the end free of
nationalist jingoism.

The problematic of ‘arriving’ is a recurring theme in *The Return*, in his other
novel *In a Far Country*, as well as in a number of his short stories. In the short
story ‘A Hundred Years After’ (1995: 69–115) a hundred years in the nation
give the narrator and his wife no identity (they remain nameless) because they
had never ‘arrived’. The arrival is left to their son and daughters, who in fact
are named. In a sense even the excesses of violence (the ritual killing of the pig
in ‘Terminal’ [1996: 1–21] for instance) are ambiguously rendered as a ritual
of arrival, and hence in spite of their unnerving cruelty redeeming. Another
short story, ‘Haunting the Tiger’, as Maniam himself explains, ‘landscapes the
interface between a dominant and a migrant culture’ (1996: xi). In an impres-
sive essay, Shanthini Pillai (2000) has pointed out that Maniam often uses the
symbol of the *kolam* – an Indian art form ‘normally drawn at the entrance to a
home to invite harmony within’ in which the artist ‘normally begins by draw-
ing a series of dots on the floor, which are then consequently embellished
by a pattern of uninterrupted lines’ – with which to rethink the very idea of
‘home’ embedded in this defining symbol of the Indian-Tamil household, the
‘cabala-like designs in white’ mentioned in Maniam’s short story ‘Haunting the
Tiger’ (1996: 39). In Pillai’s argument the centre of Maniam’s understanding
of diasporic lives is to be located not in the uninterrupted lines of this art form
but in the disruptions that constitute ethnic relations in Malaysia. The fixity of
the form, the pervasiveness of the ‘emblem’, now ceases to connect with a past
but enters territories of social relations in need of different strategies of negoti-
ation and becoming. In Maniam’s *In a Far Country* (1993a) the character Rajan
in the end recognises the importance of re-creating a *kolam* that answers to the
call of the ‘*pendatang*’ by declaring that it is now placed at the entrance of a
‘home in a far country’ (quoted by Shantihini Pillai).

Home, return, betrayal, trauma, these characterize what I have referred to
as the *girmit* ideology. And, even though the word itself and the subaltern com-
munal memory it engenders have not survived in the other plantation-Indian
diasporas, the ‘memory of a betrayed intentionality’ (Sudesh Mishra 2005: 26),
of failed millenarianism during indenture has its affects in the domain of the
aesthetic in other parts of the old Indian diaspora as well: Surinam, Trinidad,
Guyana, Mauritius and South Africa.

Between 1873, when the first ship the *Lala Rookh* arrived with ‘279 males,
70 females, 32 boys and 18 girls’ (Mitrasing 1980: 93), and 1916, 34,304 Indian
labourers came to Surinam. The period of indenture is more or less identical
with Fiji but unlike Fiji the workers were almost exclusively North Indian Hindi
speakers and their numbers never exceeded much over 150,000. The Indian
Surinamese, however, adopted Dutch as their common language, although
Bhojpuri (a dialect of Hindi) was not lost. And it is primarily in Bhojpuri that
the *girmit* experience is recalled and made into a sign of the ‘primal’ wound
arising out of dislocation. The Surinamese poet Cândani writes in Bhojpuri:
My lost youth I recall
A life spent in pain
And now days are asthmatic.

Remembering a farmer’s life
Awaiting the hour’s end
Eating with closed eyes.

(Cândani 1990: 8)

And Jit Narain, another poet from Surinam but located in Holland, also writes in Bhojpuri to express a longer narrative of indenture.

The recruiter makes indenture
The pain you suffered
Pain hidden behind the veil.

The body aches, the blood boils
This depot is alien
A stranger is recalled
The heart breaks.

And now in Dutch, an alien language
My mind roams.
What can I learn from your history?

I roll in white man’s dirt
Holding my nose
Behind the same veil.

(1988: 118; 1984: 6)

And again Jit Narain writes:

Let us endure the depot
Why does the boat sail across the sea?

Give me my grandfather
Their bread is stale
And you alone can bless me.

My feet plough the land
My hands plant seeds.

I remain inconsolable
But what else is there?
This depot is rotten
My mind begins to wander.

(1984: 38)
The Indian Surinamese tend to maintain stronger cultural ties with India owing to the presence of three large ‘ancestral groupings’ in the country: the descendants of African slaves, Indians and Javanese. There is also the historical legacy of an isolated Dutch colony in an area that is English, French, Spanish or Portuguese. There is, then, a more attenuated sense of otherness in Surinam where many more CDs and tapes of local Hindi music are produced. In the music of Kries Ramkhelawan and Anita Qemrawsing we note creative combinations of rock, soca, k-dance, reggae, rap and bobbling with the folk songs of rural India. The Indian community is also not averse to participating in cross-diasporic and India-diasporic cultural programmes, as may be seen in a Hindi newsletter such as *Setubandh* (‘The Bridge’) inaugurated by Mahatam Singh.

In Surinam the Indian diaspora is one of three dominant and mutually exclusive diasporas (Creole, Indian and Javanese); in Trinidad the Indian diaspora once again enters into a bipolar set (Indian and Creole). Like Fiji, during much of the history of Trinidad, Indians were over 40 per cent of the population; and, like Fiji again, another race, descendants of African slaves, with similar numbers had already been there and had effectively supplanted the indigenous race. Although there is no equivalence between Fijians as landowners and Afro-Trinidadians as descendants of ex-slaves, they do occupy a similar position when it comes to the question of representing the land as a cultural and national entity. And for both the idea of the ‘entity’ so defined always comes into conflict with another definition of it that comes from the other major ethnic group in the country, the Indians. Of course, there are remnants of indigenous peoples in Trinidad, too, but of such insignificance as to be no more than a haunting reminder of European (especially Spanish) genocide. As Viranjini Munasinghe (2001) points out, the cultural politics of identity of Indo-Trinidadians has to be configured with reference to Afro-Trinidadians; and, good anthropologist that she is, she makes a case that the dichotomy (and subsequent political unease) between the two races grew out of a colonial political economy that defined ‘ex-slave labour’ and ‘indentured coolie’ labour differently. Just as a Fijian multicultural identity failed to emerge, a Trinidadian multicultural identity, too, failed because it inherited a colonial legacy that left behind different messages for the two races on the crucial question of how a multicultural nation actually comes into being. The politics of cultural struggle, which in Fiji was a struggle between landowners (first nation or indigenous people) and a group historically marginalised, became in Trinidad a struggle between two ‘historically subordinate ancestral groups’ (Munasinghe 2001: 4), of African and Indian descent respectively, to become the signifiers of the nation in the colonial and postcolonial periods. Although occupying two rather distinct historical and ethnographic spaces (the Fijian with rights that only aboriginal peoples can claim and the Afro-Trinidadian with rights by virtue of being creators of a Caribbean ethos), both Fijians and Afro-Trinidadians declare their identities as being identical with that of the nations to which they belong. In both instances, therefore, the Indian is seen as being antithetical to the very idea of a national identity. In other words, the indigenous Fijian in Fiji
and the Afro-Caribbean in Trinidad alone can represent the nation both culturally and politically. Although the election of Mahendra Chaudhry as Fiji’s first Indian prime minister in 1999 and Basdeo Panday in Trinidad in 1995 turned the myth on its head, it made no real difference to the principal issue of national representation. Indeed, Chaudhry was removed a year later by a coup orchestrated by indigenous Fijians, and Panday’s own party lost the next election. Munasinghe quotes an interesting Calypsonian lament on Panday’s electoral success in 1995: ‘November 7th, (1995) I see Black Man Cry: Look blood still running from Black People Eye’ (5). Less skilled in calypso verse but with no less sense of traumatic loss, Fijians, too, chanted in a similar vein when their parties lost elections in 1977, 1987 and 1999. The Fijian historian Aseuela Ravuvu writes about the ‘stunned and angry reaction’ to the 1987 victory of the Indian-dominated Labour-National Federation party coalition (1991: 86).

Implicit in our rendition of the girmit ideology has been resistance to a homogenizing narrative of the state at a level other than that of democratic franchise. The homogenizing narrative remains a version of the narrative of assimilation which, in Trinidad, is the narrative of the Creole against the Indian notion of ancestral diversity. The Indians, as an instance of a cultural minority (although a very significant minority in this case), persist in seeing themselves as a group symbolically marginalized and excluded from the nation. Indeed, the Caribbean as a collective excludes the Indian from its image of the nation, which remains primarily Creole. At the same time in Fiji (less so here because the category of the Creole does not exist in Fiji) and in Trinidad (where the Creole is a national signifier) Indians have fiercely resisted any dilution of their cultural difference and have steadfastly refused symbolic incorporation into a prior, more fluid and mobile, ‘ethnic’ category – although, as John La Guerre (1985) points out, much as Indians in Trinidad celebrate Indian variety programmes such as Mastana Bahar as examples of the ‘vibrancy of East Indian “culture”’ (183), the presence therein of unmistakable elements of calypso conforms a stronger process of accommodation with Creole culture. There are any number of ways in which this may be read. The first is that plantation culture affirmed the Creole/Indian divide as a matter of political economy because without that divide plantation labour would have become less readily available. The second is through a contradiction inherent in post-indenture Indian life where creolization occurred at the level of lived practice but was never articulated as such at the level of political creed. Munasinghe’s study shows many instances of Indo-Trinidadian behaviour that are self-evidently Creole but are never openly acknowledged as such. To a lesser extent, but in essence not dissimilar, are the behaviour patterns of the Fiji Indian: copious drinking of yagona, a local soporific, the adoption of the discourse of the Fijian talanoa (‘social chatter’), a meat-eating diet heavily dependent on seafood and Fijian root crops, and so on. And yet these social realities do not impinge upon the definition of the Indian, who continues to see himself in exclusivistic and pure terms. What I want to emphasise, even at the expense of theoretical finesse, is the degree to which built into the girmit ideology is a general resistance to what
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may be broadly called versions of ‘creolization’. The Latin American ideal – seen in a different model of accommodation and hybridity as represented in the figure of the mestizo (Canclini 2001) – is not seen as the norm.

It is at this juncture that a work such as Helen Myers’s ethnomusicological analysis of the music of ‘Hindu Trinidad’ is of immense value. This scholarly study of the survival of musical forms in the indenture diaspora throws considerable light on the persistence of cultural practices even when there are outward signs of assimilation. Working through John La Guerre’s work (La Guerre 1983; 1985), Myers notes that ‘isolation on the cane estates’ (1998: 38) during the period of indenture (1845 to 1917) transformed an otherwise diversified community into a relatively unified one culturally. Nevertheless interactions with Creoles especially produced consensus on many matters; in language and in dress there was little that separated the two communities in Trinidad. Creoles, writes Myers, appreciate Indian food, Bollywood cinema and traditional Indian costume but find Indian ‘frugality … their attachment to soil, to the cane and rice … their elaborate Hindu liturgy’ alien if not anti-modern (41). As elsewhere in the plantation diaspora, though, in Trinidad, too, as the social anthropologist David Lowenthal (1967) has observed, Indians became a lot more conscious of their difference after India gained its independence and when the road to Trinidad independence created little political consensus between Creoles and Indians.

The Trinidad literary archive is informed by a certain greatness because of V. S. Naipaul, who, as Amitav Kumar has noted, ‘takes a prized place at the beginning of the phenomenon that we now call the literature of the Indian diaspora’ (2002: 120). His works require extensive analysis, which I shall undertake in other parts of this book. At this point I shall refer to just four writers/editors. I begin with Noor Kumar Mahabir’s (1985) collection of the girmit experience as memorially reconstructed by five people. Their stories belong to the original 143,900 indentured labourers who came to Trinidad between 1845 and 1917. These accounts are the next best thing to Sanadhya’s Bhūṭlen ki Kathā. Narrated by five people – Fazal, Moolian, Maharani, Bharath and Sankar – the stories replicate each other to a large extent and in doing so reinforce the uniform nature of the girmit experience. The passage and the barracks figure most prominently, but there are not unusual readings of India (glorious, healthy where ‘people no hungry’ [64]), of the arkaṭhi recruiters (‘feller fool me / bring me dis country’ [50]) and of the drudgery of work (‘I have to wuk / I have to slave trinidad’ [76]). I want to pause here and consider the only narrative by a woman collected by Mahabir. The woman’s name is Maharani, a Brahmin. A young widow, neglected and ill-treated by her family, she runs away from home and recalls the recruiter’s chant:

cheenee chala
cheenee chalay
going tappu
tappu may
sara bara anna
(79–80)
Sifting sugar
Sifting sugar
To the island go
There in the island
Full twenty-five cents.

In Trinidad, Maharani recalls the camaraderie of the *jahājis* (those who came on the same ship); she describes work on the plantation, life in the barracks, sexual infidelities, alcohol dependency, murders and generally the struggle for survival. In the end, though, she does not return to India because, as she declares, Trinidad is now her home.

The next stage in the saga of Maharani, the stage that marks the beginnings of a post-indenture Indian sociality, is carried in the figure of ‘Ma’ in Harold Sonny Ladoo’s uncompromisingly honest novel *No Pain Like This Body*, a novel which Dionne Brand has called ‘a Veda to the beginnings of Indian life in Trinidad’ (Ladoo 2003: xii). Set in the Tola District of the fictional Carib Island (but which is clearly Trinidad), Ladoo’s novel is an intensely painful study of violence internalized. As a family of six (alcoholic father, suffering mother, and four children) eke out a miserable existence in the wet paddy fields of the district, the only feature that remains unchanged is the capacity for cruelty. The father’s irrational acts of violence towards his children and wife are presented without remorse and with a depraved sense of enjoyment on his part. Even as his son is brought back from the hospital dead, there is no proper show of grief: Ma is forced to get drunk by village women upon the advice of Pa, the male (and female) mourners use the occasion to get drunk on rum, while Ma’s parents (Nanna and Nanny) try to maintain some sense of civility. But there is no ethical order, no remorse, no culpability because, it seems, there is no order in the lives of this transplanted Indian community: their sources of strength (religion, social solidarity) are gone. Ma goes insane and probably drowns in the wet, and post-indenture life can only be captured by the grandmother (Nanny) walking, beating a drum – a *dholak*, one presumes – with her three grandchildren in tow.

Nanny beated the drum with life; with love; she beated the drum with all her strength and the drum sounded loud as if a spirit was bawling in the forest.

A later phase of Indian post-indenture life may be seen in Ismith Khan’s novel *The Jumbie Bird*. Published in 1961, the novel (‘jumbie’ means ‘ghost’) traces the tensions in a small nuclear family of grandfather Kale Khan, his son Rahim, his daughter-in-law Meena, grandson Jamini and estranged wife Binti. Kale Khan hates both India (from which he had fled) and Trinidad (the country to which he had come). The ‘hate’ for both India and Trinidad is, however, not alike because, whereas Trinidad can never be the homeland lost (and is therefore hated), India
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is the homeland that is responsible for the trauma of displacement. India then becomes the land responsible for Kale Khan’s current condition, and Trinidad the space (symbolized by the novel’s primary location around Woodford Square ‘with its statue of Sir Ralph Woodford [governor, and an architect of the system of indentureship]’ [Puri 2004: 178]) in which the loss works itself out. He had come as a free man and not ‘like the rest of these low-class coolies in bond’ (Ismith Khan 1961: 9); but his first name, Kale, means ‘black’ and is an inflectional form of the kalā of the kalāpanī (‘black waters’, the word used for the passage of indenture). To thematize the novel in these terms overlooks levels of ambiguity at work in it and the complexity of identity politics in Trinidad generally. It is clear that, apart from the grandson Jamini (from whose point of view much of the novel is narrated and who is close to his grandfather), the other family members do not read Kale Khan’s homeland fetish in the same manner. But inasmuch as Ismith Khan’s novel makes the idea of return (real or imagined) one of the key cruxes it shows the persistence of a psychology (of return) that pervades Indian plantation or girmi culture. Like V. S. Naipaul’s itinerant ex-indenture labourers whiling away their lives in the veranda of the Tulsi store, Khan’s ‘old and decrepit Indians like Mongroo and Kareem’ wasted their lives away in the parks, ‘dreaming dreams of rains falling and monsoons pelting at their eardrums somewhere in Hindustan’ (27). The idea of belonging and not belonging (Rahim declares ‘We ain’t belong to Hindustan, we ain’t belong to England, we ain’t belong to Trinidad …’ [68]) affects everyone and implies a not uncommon condition of a diaspora lost in the desire to return to India (Kale Khan’s position) and the lure of ‘the golden rum from the sugar cane he had come to plant’ (the town fool Sookiah’s position) (139). For Kale Khan the confirmation of the journey being final (against his own view of Trinidad as a transient spot) comes from none other than the envoy from India, the newly independent country’s High Commissioner who is much feted on his arrival. When the envoy declares that Trinidad was their home, ‘a horrifying loneliness seize[d] him … there was no home, no land peopled by men among whom he could walk and feel that it was his world, his home, a world that did not leave him alien and a stranger in the streets’ (200). The wish to live leaves Kale Khan, and he dies, broken hearted like ‘the calabash that had shrivelled in the sun’ (201), during a display of his own skills as a master of the lathī, the Indian wooden stick. The suicidal act played out on another Hosay day links up with an earlier moment of militant anti-colonial resistance, the Hosay uprising of 1884, in which Kale Khan had participated. As Shalini Puri has shown in her insightful analysis of the novel, Kale Khan’s failed dream of return to India marks out an emergent ‘diasporic, creolized pan-Indian identity’ (2004: 181) which is antithetical both to the old sense of Indianness prescribed by the likes of Kale Khan and to an Afro-Trinidadian sociality that has a proprietorial grip on the uses of ‘Creole’.

The figure of the Maharani in Mahabir’s collection of plantation narratives surfaces as the grandmother of Kamla in Lakshmi Persaud’s Butterfly in the Wind (1990), another work in which ethnographic details act as anchoring points for the growth of the young Hindu girl Kamla. The past, however, exists not as
traumatic memory (which it obviously did for Mahabir’s subjects, for Ladoo’s damaged characters and for Kale Khan) but as inalienable features of the landscape. In much of what we have written so far, rendering the landscape through one’s own cultural and geographical conditioning (present, too, in Ismith Khan) is one way of stamping one’s own character on the nation-state. So in Persaud’s work one finds references to the outdoor kitchen, to the building of homes, the planting of hibiscus hedges, fruit trees and vegetables, as signs of Indian presence. Put in this way, they are no more than background material for fiction, but seen through the usage of words or practices that require a gloss we sense an inherent claim being made about registering and cataloguing the land. So we read about stems of hibiscus ‘used as tooth brushes’, mangoes made into ‘kutchala and achar’, a machan built for climbing vegetables such as keraila and the ‘fireside or chulha for cooking’, the ‘rich aroma of wood-smoke, roties lifting themselves from hot iron tawas’ (84–6), and the practice of jharayying, the casting out of evil spirits often, though not always, undertaken by pundits (107–9). In Persaud’s novel, jharay acts as a means of propitiating spirits and of releasing them from bodies. And in terms of universal everyday life Sanadhya’s observation about Christmas in Fiji is confirmed in Trinidad, too: ‘Christmas was the one festivity everybody in the village celebrated. Hindus, Moslems and Christians all planned what they were going to do for Christmas with equal fervour’ (95).

In the end, though everyday life in the old Indian diaspora cannot be isolated from the powerful pull of creolization (‘The East Indian has become as West Indian as all the other expatriates,’ wrote C. L. R. James [1992: 313]) or of living in a multiracial world. In the case of South Africa where the multiracial disappeared under the politics of apartheid, the writing of the Indian diaspora remained muted, and politically less agonistic. Only in the works of Ahmed Essop (1984; 1988; 1990) do we get fragments of everyday life under South African apartheid rendered with irony and humour. In spite of the stringent protocols of writing (where differential education, differential politics, and indeed differential life itself is the law), the triumph of Essop’s prose is located in its ability to unhinge lived experience from absolute segregation. In a short story such as ‘The Hajji’ (1988: 1–18) beneath the dominant narrative lies a statement of marital relationships (between Karim and Catherine) deemed to be illegal under apartheid. And in The Emperor (1984), Essop’s fable of a schoolmaster incapable of thinking outside of social regimentation, a critique of South African supremacist ideology is written in the crevices of the narrative. In a text that outwardly reads like a tale of ambition gone wrong, Essop is able to make coded references to the wrongs of authoritarianism. Not quite J. M. Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians (1982), but some of the same use of double coding may be seen in the following passage:

Authoritarianism in educational institutions is a product of the political order of the country. . . . Under authoritarianism the educational institution takes on the trappings of a military camp: there are inflexible rules and
regulations; superiors must be obeyed; instructions and orders are always issued; there is the emphasis on superficial display and forms. ... Of those who remain, many are silenced by fear while others become obsessed. ... (1984: 178–80)

Those who have a conscience, like the English teacher Zenobia, lose out; those who follow the master (as slave in the classic version of the Hegelian dialectic) like Dharma Ashoka, the headmaster (who even re-names the school Ashoka High School, after the great Indian emperor, but the link to his own name is noticeable), are only momentarily on the ascendant before their worlds collapse because of the authoritarian ideology's own inflexibility. With the safety of a diasporic communality gone, and crossover into other segregated worlds impossible, Dharma Ashoka takes his own life.

The Indian diaspora under conditions of apartheid and censorship in South Africa, as in Essop's works, writes fables of identity that cannot be energized by the multiracial, and certainly not by C. L. R. James's pull of creolization. It is further east from Durban, in Mauritius, that creolization is a cultural dominant. In Mauritius the Creole is both a sign of displaced indigeneity (and hence ambivalently located as the tourist face of the nation) and a threat to the 'stability of the national body politic and is marked for elimination' (Aumeerally 2005). In turn the Creole sees the Indian (hegemonic since independence in 1968) not unlike the way in which the indigenous Fijian sees the Fiji Indian, as an object of derision against whom an anti-colonial struggle is yet to be mounted. Yet French-based Creole is the lingua franca of the nation, and Mauritian writing generally cannot be seen apart from the power of the demotic mother tongue. In the political sphere the tension is obvious as the Mauritian Indian sees French as the sign of a traumatic past (the French planters see Indians as a canker in the body of the nation) but which, as the language that informs the demotic, characterizes their social beings. The tension remains unresolved in spite of the adoption of English as the official language of the nation and the medium of instruction. The tension referred to is carried in language itself, as is clear from the carefully crafted short stories of Farhad Khoyratty (2005 for example) and more directly in the remarkable dramatic corpus of Dev Virahsawmy.

'Underlying Virahsawmy's [drama] is the conviction that Creole is the only language that can translate the experiences and cultures of Mauritius for the stage' (Mooneeram 1999: 25). The status of Creole is thus marked by a peculiar paradox: it is the language in which Mauritians come into their own (it is their mother tongue) and yet it is the language from which the Mauritian wishes to escape by adopting either English or one of the many 'ancestral languages' taught in schools. Neither English nor these ancestral languages have been able to replace Creole as the language of Mauritian 'felt-experiences'. Many of these issues, including the link between politics and language in Mauritius, are central to Dev Virahsawmy's quite remarkable rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as *Toufann*. Writes Shawkat M. Toorawa, 'Cultural creolisation
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(self-invention, the emancipation of the Kreol – it is with these threads . . . that Virahsawmy weaves in and through Toufann a different and daring narrative of freedom, belonging, inclusion, and liberation’ (Toorawa 2001: 135). But as a play produced by a writer who belongs to an Indian diaspora which has become the dominant ethnic group in Mauritius, the play functions as a timely autocritique of a working-class diaspora which, once in power, begins to establish hegemonic control across both economic and cultural fields. The play was written in 1991 at a time of great prosperity in Mauritius, but the prosperity also marked the exclusion of the Creole from the benefits of economic liberalization. That exclusion took a violent turn in 1999 when the radical Creole singer Kaya was found dead whilst in police custody. Since the police force in Mauritius is predominantly Hindu (or Indian), the death of the singer led to weeks of rioting, violence and deaths. As Michael Walling has pointed out, the target of looters was shops selling electronic consumer goods as these goods were seen as the symbol of the economic miracle from which Creoles had been excluded (Walling 2006: 201–2). Virahsawmy’s play in a sense anticipates the riots as his Prospero is a computer genius and the title of the play is not the Creole word for ‘tempest’ (which is ’sikklon’) but the Hindi word for it: ’toufann’.

Virahsawmy’s play has theoretical value in the context of the failure of theories of globalization and transnationality to give intrinsic legitimacy to minority subjects. Even in those models that emphasize lateral and nonhierarchical networks (the rhizomatic model of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari is exemplary here) the centre still holds magnetic force and creates a binary in terms of which the minor (as in Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization of ‘minor literature’) is studied. And even if one were to critique the centre – a not uncommon strategy in much of postcolonial studies – the very act of critiquing it re-establishes the centre’s pre-eminence, its rather special place in all aspects of cultural production. Minorities are, however, very much part of the centre; they are not erratic and unassimilable groups somehow extraneous to the nation; they are indeed part of the national imaginary with their own legitimate perspective. The transnational (diaspora, multicultural polity) is part of globalization but requires analysis (as transnationals) neither through a utopian/dystopian reading from the liberal high ground of globalization nor from the romanticized counter-critical model of the local and the global where the local is the subaltern heroic figure stubbornly resisting the advance of global capital.

The case of Virahsawmy’s Toufann poses the question: ‘What is critical knowledge/pedagogy like when a minor text connects with other subaltern texts from postcolonial peripheries without the necessity of passing through a metropolitan centre?’ Hence one shifts from matters of intertextual control, the power of the canon and hierarchy to a more lateral postcolonial reading where other minor literatures and their modes of cultural productions become decisive. At a time when the Mauritian state is busy compartmentalizing its heterogeneous population – Indian vernaculars are being re-introduced even when for an entire century Creole and Bhojpuri-Hindi were the only functional
plantation languages – and paranoid about French as a language of settler hegemony, Virahsawmy uses Creole as the inalienable Mauritian language in which Mauritian emotions are best-expressed.

Focusing on Virahsawmy’s Creole play *Toufann* (premiered in Mauritius in 1995 and then again, in the English version, in London in December 1999), Françoise Lionnet (to whom the play is in part dedicated) examines how a ‘minor’ literature, with its clear indebtedness to Shakespeare but written in the undeclared lingua franca of the country (somewhat absurdly English, which is hardly anyone’s mother tongue in Mauritius, is the declared lingua franca), breaks away from hierarchical and centre-oriented postcolonial theory to expose a more lateral, quotidian (that is everyday) life-world (Lionnet 2005). Although Lionnet is emphatic on the title of the play and its performance as indicative of Virahsawmy’s insistence on the here and now against a diasporic nostalgia by drawing attention to Virahsawmy’s Tamil and not North India (and therefore Hindi-speaking) background, it is equally true that ‘*toufann*’, the word, does impart an indenture ethos against the settler French ethos and this is because the moment of multiple Indian vernaculars is a post-independence phenomenon as the newly independent nation tried to give every subject a past and a language. In the process, of course, Creole itself became marginalized because it had no origin in a high culture outside of Mauritius. The Indian-dominated post-independence governments, too, were uneasy about the links between Creole and French inasmuch as the language grew out of an unequal plantation-slave and French-planter social relationship. Lionnet’s point, however, is not based on this qualification, for what she advances is the fact that Creole is the language most widely spoken in Mauritius; it is the subaltern language (with no real high-culture origins elsewhere) and it opens up the possibility of a “‘transcolonial” form of solidarity’ (206).

Virahsawmy’s play not only unsettles the idea of a canon as being fixed but also, through the use of Creole, demonstrates the remarkable resilience and openness of the language. As the language of hybrid identities, Creole may be seen as the subaltern language without equal since it has no history of imperial hegemony. Moreover, the title of the play – *Toufann* – with its dual Hindi and Creole semantic (‘tou fan’ or ‘tou fane’ in Creole means ‘it’s a mess’ [213] and in the play Prospero asks Aryel to ‘create chaos’ [Virahsawmy 2001: 228]) tells the target audience that the immediate meaning of the play is to be located in local culture and politics and not in its suggestive Shakespearian intertext, which, again, becomes meaningful only through a certain kind of high-cultural knowledge. In naming one of the characters Dammorro, the junkie, Virahsawmy again connects with the growing cultural pull of Bollywood cinema on Indo-Mauritian culture. High on ganja, Dammorro relapses into ‘Dam marro dam! Hare Krishna, hare Ram’ (Virahsawmy 225). What he recalls are lines from a song in a well-known Bollywood film titled *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971). In this respect the play is located less in the politics of postcolonial self-righteous condemnation of Shakespeare’s racist representation of the native Caliban and more in the reconstructions of newer characters whose
moral agenda insinuates something rotten in the local state (of Mauritius) itself. In this respect Virahsawmy’s play accents a diaspora no longer locked into an essentialist sense of loss and alienation; instead it becomes a critical voice of diaspora as something other than a unified space marked by social and cultural exclusiveness. Virahsawmy’s reading of diaspora is as a body conscious of its own responsibilities towards the less privileged and more importantly declaring that, as in the case of Mauritian Creole, the diaspora has carved for itself a complex social imaginary which has grown out of the history of the Mauritian nation-state itself.

Theories of diaspora cannot overlook the power of creolization (or métissage) because it foregrounds the diaspora in a different sense of being ‘rooted’. In this context the works of Samuel Selvon constitute a remarkable corpus. Yet creolization in Selvon, although presented as a homogenizing social process, is read ambivalently especially when seen from the perspective of the Indian. The ambivalence is noted by critics like Clement H. Wyke (1991), for whom creolization conceals ‘(the Indian’s) identity’, and Kenneth Ramchand, who suggests that, although Selvon’s first and perhaps most powerful novel, A Brighter Sun (1971), makes dialect ‘the language of consciousness in West Indian fiction’ (Ramchand 1972: 105), the insistence on dialect and creolization is not unmarked by a certain ambivalence towards creolization as the sign of homogenization. In A Brighter Sun as Tiger and Urmilla, people of Indian plantation culture (‘Urmilla knelt on the floor of the small kitchen and crushed the tumric and dhania with the massala stone’ (164)), negotiate new interpersonal relations with the Creole Joe and Rita Martin, they do so, it seems, conscious of their difference and their very different history when it came to addressing modernity, which, with the arrival of American soldiers, and American money, too, into Trinidad during the Second World War, takes a more urgent turn. But it is not Tiger or his wife Urmilla, or even the Martins, who carry the weight of history in this novel. That weight is carried by the drunkard and itinerant Sookdeo (he is not unlike the itinerant Sookiah we find a little later in Ismith Khan’s novel) whose death comes soon after a modern road bisects his house and land and his beloved mango tree is destroyed. Before Sookdeo dies he has a dream:

He dreamed in the night that a big ’dozer came up behind him while he was working in the ricefield, and when he turned round, the ’dozer scooped him up and flung him far into the swamp, over the coconut trees and the mangroves. Then, after that, he dreamed how he was in the cane fields when his parents had brought him from India to work in Trinidad. He was in the cane fields and an American came and said, ‘Hey, you’re Sookdeo?’ And when he said yes, the American said, ‘All right, we want you!’ … and he ran into a patch of canes to hide.

(Selvon 1971: 152)

The dream is structured to reflect Sookdeo’s own life story, but one of the centres remains sugar cane, a key motif in Selvon’s work here and elsewhere.
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In a powerful short story Selvon renders the motif of sugar cane with great ironic force. ‘Cane Is Bitter’ (1973) is a tightly written story about a young man Romesh’s ‘revolt’ against timeless life on the estate: ‘Nothing would change. They would plant the cane, and when it grew and filled with sweet juice cut it down for the factory. The children would waste away their lives working with their parents’ (Selvon 1973: 66).

In the hands of Rooplall Monar, the Guyanese writer, Creole becomes the language through which the life worlds of the Indo-Guyanese community are given expression. Whether it is religious difference coming in the way of love, as in ‘Pork Eater’ (1990) and ‘Infidel’ (1992: 56–69), or politics as in ‘Election Fever’ (1992: 151–62), the latter two stories from High House and Radio, the demotic alone can carry the tragi-comic nature of post-indenture life. It is language, then, which expresses the social, which offers a second order of meaning even when the act itself, as in the description of Alim’s violent reaction towards his daughter Naimoon for having an affair with the Hindu Sharma, is unforgivable:

Blai Bladai . . . Alim out he right hand and let-go two heavy slap on Naimoon face which cause Bibi [Alim’s wife] to siver downstairs. Bibi know is murderation tonight. Suddenly she bowel go-off, and she hustling to the latrine in the backyard, whispering, ‘Allah, is murderation tonight.’

(1992: 65)

The aesthetic order as an expression of felt experience makes the demotic, which is both expressive of the social as well as an ironic commentary on it, central to artistic expression. In the final story of his collection High House and Radio (1992) called ‘Cookman’ (1992: 163–74) once again it is language itself which undercuts class and economic difference. Pandit, master cook of mutton curry, is in demand by the boss of Bookers Sugar Plantation, Mr Douglas, by the cricketers and by almost everyone else. But the comedy of life around curry, funny as it is, cannot change real power relations as Creole is not in the same league as ‘backraman [white man’s] language’ and even emigration to England in the wake of the race riots of 1962 is framed as a confession of linguistic incompetency: ‘Me just going to make meself a damn fool. Is everybody talking the backraman language in London’ (174). The demotic as ‘body’, as a corporeal signifier uncensored by formal language, unifies experience which, in spite of its humour, always implies lives lived at the edges of worlds bitter and harsh.

Where A Brighter Sun and Monar’s short stories use dialect ambivalently to suggest the processes of creolization as the way forward, Selvon’s ‘Cane Is Bitter’, as we have already noted, syncopates the tales memorially recounted by Mahabir’s informants as a haunting and haunted presence. There is something in the nature of cane itself that generates the oxymoron: the cane’s bitterness is a metaphor of the severity of plantation life both socially and economically. It is the centrality of that metaphor and its links to both a prior (indenture) and a later (free) history that energizes the verse of the Guyanese poet David Dabydeen.
'But cane is we stubborn Cross, it don’t give one scunt for Romance,' writes David Dabydeen (1988: 23). Between 1838 and 1917, 240,000 indentured labourers went to British Guiana, which had more extensive sugar plantations than many of the other colonies. The estates, until recently owned by the British company Bookers, were the ‘homes’ of most Indo-Guyanese, who lived and worked in them. Reflecting perhaps on Selvon’s ‘Cane Is Bitter’ Dabydeen, in an introductory essay, refers to the Guyanese in literature as subjects who are ‘creatures of peasant flesh squelching through mud and cane-field’ (1986: 9) and who are damned by what they produce since rum (distilled from sugar) and sugar (the cause of endemic diabetes) in the end kill them. As agriculture, canecutting is a labour-intensive ‘savage ceremony, cutlass slashing away relentlessly at bamboo-hard body of cane; planting is equally vicious, a repeated stabbing into the soil’ (1986: 12). For Dabydeen, the tenderness of dialect attributed to Selvon is replaced by a ‘vulgarity’ of the dialect, existing most powerfully in its oral forms. In both Rooplall Monar and David Dabydeen language therefore becomes a broken primal cry, raw like a wound: ‘the canecutter aspires to lyrical experience and expression but cannot escape his condition of squalor nor the crude diction that such a condition generates’ (1986: 14). In Dabydeen’s poem ‘The Canecutters’ Song’ (1986: 25–6) this raw language find lyricism in a dialectic in which the white woman (of the master) is the object of desire of the canecutter (slave). Upon her the canecutter pours, almost as a religious tribute, sexual yearnings depleted by the conditions of indenture. The climax of such outpouring is framed in a food, the ‘baigan-chokey’ (roasted aubergine mixed with onions and condiments) which, along with dhal-puri, is a standard indenture cuisine. At the heart of the poem lies cane as displaced phallus and indicated as such in the picture of a piece of sugar cane that accompanies the poem. Apart from the white woman, there are also two other significant women in Dabydeen’s collection of verse. The first is ‘Ma’ around whom an indenture pastoral of rolling roti and cooking curry in the ‘karahee’ (‘For Ma’, 1986: 37) as well as the often thankless toil of women generally are enacted. The second is ‘Mala’ (‘For Mala’, 1986: 19–20) through whom the broken pastoral finds a traumatized voice. The year 1964 saw the massacre of hundreds of Indians in Guyana, with the worst episode occurring at Wismar where Afro-Guyanese went on a killing rampage that, within hours, left many Indians dead, raped or mutilated. In Dabydeen’s rendition of the trauma (in ‘For Mala’), though, the stark imagery of a womb squashed open, made hollow, and again transformed into a type of religious desecration (‘Somebady juta Gaad holy fruit so man can’t taste she sweetness no mo!’ where the Hindi word ‘juta’ makes the puja offering itself unclean), nevertheless leads to the massacre as itself being somehow redemptive as the ‘Coolie grind massala, na mattie bone’, the coolie will grind masala and not people’s bones. Needless to say, though, the recurrence of the Wismar massacre in Dabydeen’s verse gives it a highly traumatic meaning. Further, the juxtaposition of the event with metaphors of the primal indenture experience links the function of the girmit ideology itself to a structure of consciousness (in a way) that a later event (such as the massacre) always repeats, makes meaning
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of, much as the second, symbolic, wounding of Clorinda by her lover Tancred in Tasso’s Gerusalemme Liberata (in Freud’s reading of it) repeats the original act and makes it meaningful (Freud 1984b: 293; Caruth 1996: 2).

The girmi ideology as laid down here is meaningful provided that we pay attention to two features of plantation culture. The first is that the experience of indenture is directly related to the production of one commodity, sugar. The second is the acceptance of labour as a measurable unit of work, what Marx referred to as abstract labour. Clearly the latter does not mean that the indentured labourer understood the role of capital in plantation life, but it does mean that since plantation labour was measured in terms of a particular formula (where some twelve or thirteen hours of work was translated into one shilling) labour could (and did) become a measurable form of human activity. Before I expand on these points with reference to a rare instance of girmi critique and resistance, I want to refer very quickly to the most extensive fictional rendition of the girmi experience. It is to be found in the Mauritian Abhimanyu Anat’s Hindi novel Lāl Pasinā ([Bloody Sweat] 1977). The novel is a sprawling saga, part social critique, part romance, part historical survey which has a direct antecedent in Anand Mulloo’s novel of Mauritian Indian plantation life, Watch Them Go Down (1957) (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 2002). In the limited space at my disposal, I want to capture two moments in this novel. The first is the labourer Kisen Singh’s account of a dream to his jahāji uncle Kundan. Kundan explains that dreams have no meaning, dreams are like sweat because sweat, too, has no meaning. Kisen is taken aback and answers that sweat has meaning. ‘Look around us, the greenery, the crops, all these are related to sweat’ (64). Yes, replies Kundan, this is true, but the real beneficiaries of sweat are those who never shed a drop, those who benefit from the surplus value of labour. The second moment is Kisen’s heroic act in getting between the planters and the workers, who do not wish to leave their allotted plots of land. A fracas ensues, and the planters give the order to shoot. The narrator’s voice intercedes: ‘Kisen Singh’s death was the death of history. And the death of history is apocalyptic’ (215). This, the narrator adds, is something the master understood, even if the slave does not.

There was, however, one ‘slave’, Bechu by name, who stands as an anomaly; one indentured labourer who seems to have slipped through the net, who seems to have outwitted recruiting agents and who enters girmi as an extraordinarily articulate man in his mid-thirties. He is a Totaram Sanadhya with a difference in that he is exceptionally fluent in English and intervenes in the discourse of plantation labour to dismantle its contradictions. This man, Bechu, understands Anat’s fictional hero Kisen, he understands how capital had abstracted labour (as a measurable unit) from workers and, what is even more exciting, he presents us with a fulsome testimonio of resistance.

Bechu, of middling kurmi (agricultural) Bengali in origin, without a first name, which is not uncommon among Indians, reached British Guinea as an indentured labourer in the ship Sheila on 20 December 1894. He was 34, unusually slight for an indentured labourer and, it seems, unfit to work on Plantation Enmore, East Coast Demerara, to which he was indentured upon
arrival. Within months he was given another task, that of assisting a ‘Creole driver’, and then moved to the manager’s house as a domestic servant. These are unremarkable events, and Bechu, like other ‘incapables’, would have been sent back to India upon the expiry of his initial five-year contract. He did go back – in 1901 – but not before challenging many aspects of plantation power relations. Prone to bouts of fever (he was probably consumptive), Bechu nevertheless had unusual moral strength and, it seems, craft enough to make up for his poor physique. There is certainly no mythic dimension to his name as he remained ‘undiscovered’ until the 1960s when the economic historian Alan Adamson chanced upon this ‘unusual champion of Indian sugar plantation workers in British Guinea between 1896 and 1901’ (Seecharan 1999: 13). His is therefore a case of a kind of postcolonial recovery of narratives until recently silenced by a predominantly colonial historiography that gave primacy to colonial despatches and government statistics. To narrate Bechu’s story as part of a girmit ideology we need to trace two histories: Bechu’s personal history and his public persona. The former takes us back to an orphaned child placed, like a character in Dickens, in the care of the Calcutta Scottish Presbyterian Mission where he stayed until 1876, when he turned sixteen and when Miss Cameron, his teacher and mentor at the mission died. For the next eighteen years he worked with various British ‘gentlemen’ (as he was fond of recalling) in whose company he did some travelling to places as far away as Rangoon. At the age of 34 difficult financial circumstances or so he claimed (but perhaps also a falling out with his ‘gentlemen’ patrons – one is not too sure), led him to seek work elsewhere. A wily recruiter (in girmit language the ‘arkāṭhi’) always on the lookout for new labourers to indenture met his match in the Christian Bechu, who clearly presented himself as an accomplished agricultural worker in spite of his slight physique, his Anglicized body language and Bengali accent. The Bechu who sets sail in the Sheila is therefore not, except for his caste, your typical indentured labourer. This personal account of Bechu (gathered from his letters) has to be set alongside the Immigration Agent General, A. H. Alexander’s, account of ‘A short history of Bechu’ sent to the Governor of British Guinea, Sir Walter Sendall, on 1 July 1899. Obviously taken aback by the presence of a ‘bound coolie’ so extraordinarily fluent in the English language (‘[he] could not have come to this colony as a common labourer unless there had been some good cause or necessity for his leaving India’), Sendall wrote to the Immigration Agent in Calcutta requesting a biography of Bechu. Since there was no trace of Bechu (it looks as if even Bechu’s emigration pass is non-existent) in the Calcutta office, Alexander could only conclude that Bechu was not telling the truth about his past. Indeed, the Governor’s own conclusion, which he conveys to the Secretary of State on 19 July 1899, is that Bechu was probably a ‘fugitive from justice’. There is much here that is of interest to a scholar bent on recovering the ‘real Bechu’. For us the search for the real Bechu is less interesting than Bechu this ‘rebellious spirit’, in Seecharan’s words (21), who turned the girmitiya stereotype on its head.
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When Bechu reached British Guiana, the colony’s Indian population was over 110,000; there was an over-supply of labour, and demand for sugar had plummeted rather dramatically. Although fewer than 18 per cent of Indians remained formally indentured, freehold land was difficult to come by and when available was either beyond the reach of the freed labourer or unavailable, as a matter of implicit government policy, to him. So Bechu comes to a colony where the vast majority of Indians, although legally free, continued to work on plantations as ‘bound coolies’.

From 20 December 1894 to 26 February 1897, Bechu is a ‘bound coolie’, a domestic helper in the manager of Plantation Enmore’s house, happy with his lot with, it seems, ready access to newspapers, almanacs, government publications, Trollope (he quotes Trollope on the plantation political system as ‘despotism tempered by sugar’ [Seecharan 153]) and the like. Towards the end of this period, something happens that results in the publication on 1 November 1896 of perhaps the first letter written by a ‘bound coolie’ for the liberal newspaper the Daily Chronicle. It is difficult to speculate on the readership of this newspaper, but if other colonial newspapers of the period are anything to go by the readership was mainly colonial officers, planters and their staff and a small coterie of government clerks drawn primarily from the Creole population. There would have been some Indian readers no doubt but not too many. So the letter would have had a dramatic impact since the writer signs himself as ‘Bechu (Indentured Immigrant, Sheila, 1894)’. How could a recently arrived illiterate indentured labourer write so well? Is this a fake, a letter ghost-written by someone else? Does ‘Bechu’ exist at all? Let us read the letter afresh.

Bechu’s letter is about labour, its function in plantation culture and its monetary value. Indenture, as Bechu established so clearly, was based on labour measured in terms of time and pence. He refers to the agreement (origin, as we know, of the term girmit) signed by ‘bound coolies’. Written in three languages (English, Hindi and Urdu) and not understood unless verbally translated into the labourer’s vernacular, the agreement very clearly stipulated conditions under which one worked on a plantation. The agreement very precisely states the period of service (five years), the nature of labour (primarily the cultivation of sugar cane), workdays per week and hours of work each day (Monday to Saturday excluding designated holidays; seven to ten hours per day), daily wages and task rates, guaranteed paid return passage after ten years, provision of ration. Bechu then comes to the point: the planters are not keeping their side of the bargain because punt loaders are given nine shillings per week (a shilling and six pence per day) for fourteen to fifteen hours of labour each day. There is nothing insidious about the tone of the letter; nor is there in it information not readily available to all readers. What is unusual is the fluency with which the letter was composed and the fact that a ‘cooie’ had destroyed the myth of the stereotypical illiterate Indian worker. Above all, Bechu uses the discourse of the master against the master himself. Bechu’s letters (for many were to follow) mark the beginning of a self-assertiveness that was to transform itself into a politics of equal rights and fair pay for labour. The indentured labourer
had entered the field of capital because he understood abstract labour as a unit that can be given monetary value. This understanding would gradually place the girmit man apart from his non-Indian co-workers and other colonized subjects. It would, finally, lead to a very different understanding of the nation-state.

There is something else behind Bechu’s first letter, although in it Bechu makes no reference to it. He refers to it some seven weeks later in a letter to the Daily Chronicle dated 22 December 1896. Between this letter and the first, Bechu had been defended by a fellow Indian (‘J. R. Wharton’) and vilified by members of the plantocracy (‘Langton’ and John Russell). In his letter of 22 December, the genesis of Bechu’s first letter of complaint regarding work conditions becomes clear. A fortnight before his first letter appeared (that is, on 13 October 1896) five coolies were killed by armed policeman and 59 were injured at Plantation Non Pareil. Bechu had remained ‘as quiet as a mouse’ these past two years but when he ‘saw that the lives of four of my countrymen were sacrificed for nothing, and that about ten times that number had been injured for life’ he had written (on 1 November 1896) to explain the ‘real cause of the disturbance’. As Bechu points out, the disturbance was about breach of a contract that allowed coolies to earn a shilling a day. Three gangs of indentured coolies from Plantation Non Pareil had left their estate to go to Georgetown to seek a resolution of their grievance from the Immigration Agent General. They were told to return to the estate and a sub-agent would look into their complaint. What followed was a breach of promise as the agent arrived with armed policemen and arrested the gang leaders for conspiring to kill the manager of Non Pareil (a baseless charge). When the rest of the coolies followed the policemen, requesting that they, too, should be arrested, shots were fired over their heads. They retaliated with sticks and stones, and in the ensuing fracas five people were killed. As Bechu continued to write, not so much about the incident itself, as about a culture that dehumanised workers, many other matters began to converge. The abuse of women in plantation culture (slave or indenture) is one of the better-known, albeit least well documented, aspects of plantation life. In the riot and killings that Bechu wrote about, one of the ringleaders who was killed was Jungali. His wife Jamni was kept as a mistress by the plantation manager, whose life, it was alleged by police, had been threatened by the coolies. Now, what becomes so clear is that ‘coolie anger’ is about adequate price for unit of labour plus high levels of sexual abuse. Bechu’s letters are to be placed in the context of a culture that denied the worker any dignity or self-respect; they are meant to correct readings of the coolie as malicious, unreliable, two-faced, and a constant whinger, and finally they point towards the coolie’s own capacity to reason, by which Bechu means the coolies’ own rather different entry into the discourse of modernity. What both the Non Pareil agitation and Bechu’s own letters also show is that indenture introduced the coolies to modernity, to the challenge of knowledge and to a nascent democratic spirit. Bechu was clearly exceptionally accomplished, even gifted, an ironic instance of the success of Thomas Babington Macaulay’s well-known 1835 Minute on Indian Education
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(‘Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect’ [Trautmann 1997: 111]). Indeed, he could interpret one of the strengths of imperialism – reliance on statistics – and use it against his masters. So at a time when the price of sugar was particularly low and planters used it as a pretext to cut wages (the agitation at Non Pareil in October 1896 was linked directly to it) Bechu made a case for the cessation of immigrant labour for the time being, diversification of agriculture (especially the cultivation of rice) and, for those willing to continue working on plantations, reindenture. These may seem the work of any correspondent to a colonial newspaper, but if we examine the letter (dated 24 November 1897) in which these recommendations are made we notice a remarkable use of statistical data and highly sophisticated analysis. The question posed by Bechu is this: Why continue to import labour when (a) the price of sugar is so low and overproduction simply makes the price fall even further, (b) the reindenture of able-bodied men costs much less than repatriating existing workers on the grounds that they are eligible for a return passage to India?

The establishment of course charged him for libel (unsuccessfully), and in the end, in 1901, he left British Guinea, not to be heard of again. But he stands as an extraordinary instance of resistance within colonial regimes of control and, curiously, as a very astute critic of the political economy of plantation culture. The ‘recovery’ of his letters and the material surrounding his ‘two inconclusive trials in 1899’ (Seecharan 1999: 72) also demonstrates the degree to which the girmit ideology is also about modernity as a universal principle (of justice) and not an exclusively Western one.

In any theory of the Indian diaspora, the girmit ideology (even when the word girmit itself carries little social or cultural capital outside Fiji and possibly South Africa) stands out as one of its more tenacious paradigms because it links a particular mode of labour transaction (the political economy of classic capitalism) with movement of people. And, since the archive that underpins the ideology is a pre-given (it is in the past), it allows us to understand the literary corpus produced in the plantation diaspora in terms of a relatively unified experience. The case, as made here, is that the girmit ideology has many of the characteristics of classic definitions of ideology including some understanding of the end of ideology itself (the latter often transformed into the dream of a democratic polity). In terms of the Indian diasporic imaginary the girmit ideology’s significance lies in the way in which it functions as a discursive crucible of unhappiness, and as a means of understanding the ways in which we have invested in our own unhappiness. For the people of the old plantation-Indian diaspora the girmit ideology is the ghost that reminds the son of the endless unhappiness of diaspora ‘Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purg’d away’ (Hamlet I. v. 12–13).