

**Satendra Nandan, *Across the Seven Seas* (IVY Press International Publishers, 2017)**

Satendra Nandan's *Across the Seven Seas* is a thin volume of poems containing nine poems that speak of loss, nostalgia, memory, home, longing, grief, indenture and displacement. Indenture in Fiji, known as 'Girmit' (a corruption of the word 'agreement'), was abolished in the year 1917. The centenary was commemorated in 2017 in Fiji and in many other parts of the postcolonial world where the Indian diaspora is present. *Across the Seven Seas* is a Girmit Abolition Centennial Volume. The poems in the volume speak of the Girmit experience in Fiji, its presence in the lives of many who gave up their homeland and moved to Fiji, and of the abolition of indenture and of the coups that took place in Fiji, often leading to more displacement and movement.

An academic who traces his roots to India, Satendra Nandan, was also a member of the House of Representatives owing allegiance to the National Federation Party in Fiji. He later joined the Fiji Labour Party and was a minister in the government. After the coup of 1987, Nandan moved to Australia, where he now lives and teaches at the Australian National University in Canberra. He returned to Fiji in February 2005 and has, since 2006, made significant contributions to the building of a new Fiji.

Nandan belongs to the third generation of his family to have been born in Fiji. His forefathers belonged to India and Nandan's poems in the volume under review frequently refer to India as the homeland that once was. The indenture past that was part of the lives of his forefathers colours his thinking and is evident in his poems. The coup caused him to leave Fiji, thereby causing another displacement.

The first poem in the volume, 'Votualevu Junction' brings in various issues that are of importance to the diaspora. The poem refers to the coup and of 'coups within coups' in Fiji: it talks about how for a second time he is rejected, this time by the country which has always been home for him, Fiji. The cultural bonds that his people have worked at creating in the new homeland, markers that still retain some of the cultures of India, are lost again:

For me all stories began at my birth,  
When dream flowed in many streams  
The palms grew tall like my brothers:  
Where my cut umbilical cord was buried  
Under the mango tree with fruitful boughs  
That I thought was my piece of earth. (14)

The coup of 1987 changed Nandan's bonds with Fiji. He moved to Australia, to a new land and country. The angst of a new displacement is revealed in the poem:

My mind had read, my eyes travelled,  
Now that my bones ache, my mind roams  
I can only imagine the pain of those men  
Who fathered us in their storm-tossed homes. (31)

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The Indian diaspora in Fiji had strong contributions to Fiji's growth and prosperity. Nandan's poems bring in feelings of nostalgia, anguish, assimilation and finally betrayal. It is the betrayal of values and beliefs that cause great pain, that bring back to memory all the hardships that indenture and slavery entailed. There is, at the same time, a deep sense of attachment to the country that became home to the indenture diaspora and a sense of rejection that caused him to leave. Nandan was born in Nadi, and in the poem 'Nadi Airport,' he speaks of war, displacement, loss, memory, death, and home.

Over landscapes we fly  
But the heart remains in one spot  
A country so warm and hot  
A place of your first grace. (42)

Addressed to his 'fellow Fijians', the poem, 'The Coup: A Day in May', speaks of the Fiji coups of 1987. These coups came as a shock to Fiji Indians who had worked hard to assimilate in their new land and make it home. Nandan speaks of it as a betrayal – 'Muhmeinramram, bagal me choori!' (49)

It was a bloodless coup, they say,  
In the customary Pacific way.  
No stains were left on prison walls  
No blots on the army fatigues  
The pavements of the city were clean  
There was silence in the mouth of every gun  
Only masks shone, shimmered in the sun. (50)

One of the poems in the volume that speaks sensitively about the ideas of loss and mourning is 'Antyesti Samskara.' The poem speaks of his coming to Fiji to perform the funeral rites of his mother – 'Of course one never returns to the same place' (53).

The presence is your postcard of pain, loss and relics  
of remembrances in the attic of memory. (53)

Written in prose, 'Antyesti Samskara', the title meaning last rites, speaks of his leaving Fiji for Australia and returning on hearing the news of his mother's death. The prose voices sadness and loss vividly, with a sense of great poignancy. There are lines in verse which is the poem that he reads at his mother's funeral ceremony and then again prose as he revisits the place that was once home for him. Nostalgia and memory colour the poem that beautifully brings in the predicament of the exile. The line, 'An unanchored soul had been finally anchored, or so we consoled ourselves,' brings in the idea of the displaced subtly (73).

'In the Shadows of a Tree,' refers to the Girit – 'One simple, single word distorted' (78). The displacement and sense of loss are vividly evoked in the poem 'The Wreckage of Syria', which refers to a ship carrying immigrants:

The Syria with 540 souls on board  
Sailed from Calcutta on 13 March  
By the Cape of Good Hope:  
Hope was all they carried in their hearts (87)

A news report on the television about refugees dying in a ship wreck takes the poet back to another time and another ship.

Is it a story  
Of yesterday's glory  
Or today's grief? (89)

Each of the poems in the volume speak poignantly of the loss and agony of the Girit who's longing for home remains. Many are interspersed with Hindi words, sometimes two or three words are put together with no spaces between them lending them an urgency and colloquialism. The title alludes to a popular Hindi line that refers to the land across seven seas as a utopia and hence is ironic given the fact that the land and country referred to in the poems is anything but utopian.

**Nishi Pulugurtha**