

# *Shifting homes and identities in the global village*

## *A personal narrative*

*Satish Rai*



*To summarize, the home where I was born and grew up is now fenced up and owned by someone else. The farms that we nurtured so well is now fully-grown jungle after being reserved by the government, supposedly for the benefit of the native Fijians. I literally lost the home which my parents, my siblings and I had built over the period. Only two members of our extended family now live on our homestead where once some 50-60 people lived side by side in harmony. Once a pristine village where neighbours lived in harmony, is now void of those neighbours and where once lush sugarcane farms added to the scenery, now stands shabby jungle. Travelling far and wide in the largest island of Fiji, I have witnessed similar scenes in many villages.*

In this short article I will try to articulate some of my thoughts on what I feel is the shifting nature of home and identities today in the world. The world which is far more connected today than when I grew up in a small village of Natabua in Fiji Islands, situated in the sugar city in the largest island consisting of some 350 small islands in the largest ocean in the world. I will try to articulate my thoughts by drawing on my own personal journey which took me from my small village to town of Lautoka at age of 13 when I graduated from primary school to secondary school which was initially situated in this town. Even when the school shifted to the suburb of this sugar town, I had to first travel to the town by bus and then either walk or take another bus to the school.

After successfully completing my secondary school I shifted to the Suva city, the capital of Fiji situated some 215kms away from my village to attend Fiji School of Medicine, which was a part of the University of South Pacific at that time. Much followed in the short few years, including my marriage to a British citizen in 1979. A year later I made a conscious decision to temporarily migrate to Britain with my wife. This took me from a small island nation, straddling the zero-degree longitude, to a much larger island where the longitude crossed at 180 degrees. Once one reaches Greenwich, where I spent most of my fifteen year stay in Britain, one starts to return home to Fiji; I could not have moved further away from Fiji even if I wanted. The coups of Fiji in 1987 was a very series blow to me and my sense of home and identity. My plan to return to Fiji was seriously dented and I found myself in self exile in Britain.

Fifteen years later, my personal and professional issues compelled to leave London, the city I had come to love, and migrate to Australia, a country I had little knowledge and no inclination to live just a few months prior to making the decision to migrate there. Twenty plus years later, I have now come to love the country and regard this as the home for me for rest of my natural life on this earth.

In the meantime, as part of my quest to find a home and identity for me, I traced my ancestral homes in India. This quest started in 1994 and in 2004 I finally visited the home of my maternal grandmother in the district of Balrampur in Uttar Pradesh, India. In 2019 I visited the ancestral home of my maternal grandfather in the district of Lakhimpur in Uttar Pradesh India. Between 1994 and 2019 I visited some 15 times and have travelled extensively from north India to south India and from east India to west India.

Since leaving Fiji in 1980 I have travelled back to Fiji 3 times from London and more than 10 times since migrating to Australia. I have also travelled to London 4 times since 1995 and to India some 15 times since my first visit in 1994.

From my birth till today in 2019, I lived in Fiji for first 23 years of my life; 15 years in Britain and some 23 years in Australia. Since arriving in Australia, I have worked in Fiji for some 3 years and have made more than 20 films and television programs in India.

Before I continue, I would like to introduce one Indian saying and three words that helps me to articulate my thoughts on this topic. The saying is *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which is a Sanskrit word and means *the world is one family*. The words are *janambhumi* (birthplace) *matrabhumi* (motherland) and *karmabhumi* (place where one lives and works).

As I grew up in the small village of Natabua, for the first thirteen years of my life my whole world was confined to my village and a selected few villages around it. Slowly my world expanded to my town and then to the capital city of my birthplace Fiji. In 1980 my world opened when I flew across to the other side of the world to live in London. For next four years London had become my world as I tried to establish myself there. In 1984 I travelled back to Fiji for the first time and since 1994 my international travels increased dramatically. The travels took me to Canada, USA, NZ, Fiji and India. In relatively short period the world had opened up dramatically as well, and has today become a global village which is very well connected by air and sea as well as digitally. Today, the world has surely become *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, and I can safely say today I feel a citizen of this global family.

The emergence of a global community and hugely easier transportation system, digital connectivity and relatively easier and open international borders, means that millions of people are travelling frequently in the global village to migrate as economic settlers or migrant workers, refugees, asylum seekers or as tourists. These are the millions who are affected by the accompanying issues of adjusting to new countries and in the unfamiliar new environments they suddenly find themselves. At some stage of their lives they may also grapple with what homes means to them and they may also have questions about their identities.

When I migrated to Britain with my British wife and yet to be born daughter in 1980, for first few years I was not much troubled by my identity and my new home. I was young, with a new family to look forward and a chance to explore a new country; the queen's country! Soon I had two lovely children, a beautiful house in a much sought-after residential area in Kent, bordering greater London. I was a police officer in the Metropolitan Police; one of the most respected police services in the world. London was just beginning to look like a home away from home. Fiji was still my *janambhumi* (birthplace) and had a very important place in my heart. Majority of my family members were still living in Natabua, my birthplace and most of my primary school and secondary school friends and university mates were still living in Fiji and were in my thoughts a lot. My attachment to Fiji persuaded me in 1984 to leave my young family in London and travel all the way to the other side of the world to meet them; just four years after migrating to Britain.

However personal matters in London in 1985 and political coups of 1987 in Fiji contributed towards reanalysing my perceptions of home in Fiji as well as in Britain. I came first to know about the 1987 Fiji coup when I switched on my television set in my bedsit in London. I was already dealing with my personal issue, with help of women and wine, rather sudden separation from my wife and children in 1985. I had also resigned from my job with the London Met Police a few days earlier to the first coup in Fiji. From living in a beautiful suburban house with my family, within a few short years I was reduced to living in a rented bedsit in the foothills of Shooters Hill. The images of the Fiji coup that I saw on the television set was like an arrow through my soul, killing immediately the feeling of Fiji as home for me that I had nurtured since my childhood. Even after separating from my wife, I was hopeful that one day soon I would return to Fiji; hopefully with my wife and children. When I was in Fiji in 1984, I had met with the commissioner of Fiji police and discussed prospects of me re-joining Fiji police upon my return to Fiji. I was studying for sergeant's examination as part of an accelerated promotion program in the Met Police and I was hopeful that in a few short years I would be promoted to the rank of police inspector. That would be good time to return to Fiji and re-join Fiji police. However, that dream was shattered soon and the images on the television that I saw sealed my fate as far as returning to Fiji was concerned. Fiji was no longer a home to which I could return to live. Thus, since then I found myself living in exile in Britain and I focussed on making Britain my home in exile, my *karmabhumi*. My *janambhumi* (place of birth) was no longer an option open to me to be my *karmabhumi* as well.

After the initial few years of physical, mental and emotional struggles, I managed to secure a new life for me in London. In a few short years I obtained a degree, became an elected councillor in a local government and got a good job in a local government across the Thames river. I made many new friends in the voluntary sector, politics and local governments across London. London had replaced Fiji as my new home.

However, UK and London could not give back my identity. In London I was still a '*big Fijian*'; jokingly called Rabuka, after Setiveni Rabuka, the 1987 Fiji coup maker. The Asians (Indians, Pakistanis and other people of Indian origin living in UK) did not see me as one of them; I no longer felt like a Fijian! Years of experiences with racism, especially as a principal anti-racist officer in London, I could not regard myself British. I was consumed with compelling desire to find who I was.

I began to think about old Bhola, a former indentured labourer (*girmitya*) who was transported to Fiji for cheap labour as a young boy by the British and discarded without any care when they left in 1970. He had spent his last few years in the Natabua Old Peoples' home, around which we grazed cattle in our teenage days. I used to sit with Bhola sometimes and listen to him talk about India. At that time, I had no idea what *girmitya* was and what Bhola said to me made little sense to me then. The only knowledge I had of India was through reading Ramayana, Hindi books and newspapers. I was vaguely aware that I was Indian, but India was not in my consciousness. Now sitting in London, alone and rudderless, I thought of Bhola and his India. As part of my degree I studied international race issues, including African slavery and Indian indenture (*girmitya*) system of human trafficking. In 1993 I had begun writing a book which told stories of African slavery, Indian indenture system and their links to the Eurocentric racism in UK. I had acquired some knowledge of how my four grandparents were transported to India in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that my identity thus went beyond Fiji. All my grandparents were Indians and they died as Indians in Fiji because they could not return to their homes in India. My parents were born in Fiji, and even then they had to write Indian as their identity on all official documents. I also had to write Indian on my official documents. None of us were ever Fijians; the coups of 1987 made that brutally clear to me and many of the Indians in Fiji as well.

I recalled my elders saying that India was our *matrabhumi*, our motherland; my motherland was calling, and I felt compelled to visit her and find out where my grandparents were from. I was compelled to renegotiate and establish my identity. My life in London, despite my social, academic, political and employment successes, was getting very lonesome and extremely difficult to negotiate since my separation from my family in 1985. I felt I needed some sort of stability in my life in order to get my life back. When everything else was shifting so quickly around me, I felt that getting reconnected with my ancestors in India would provide that stability in my life; act as an anchor for me to negotiate rest of my life.

I first went to India in search of my *matrabhumi*, my motherland, in 1994. With little knowledge about my ancestors in India, and with no knowledge of the vast country that India is, I did not find any success in even getting close to the village where my paternal grandmother was born. However, I did find out in the holy city of Ajodhya that my surname Rai meant that I belonged to the Bhumihar Brahmin caste. Until then I had no idea which caste I belonged and had little idea about the caste system that existed in India. I did have some idea about the varnas in the *Sanatan Vedic Dharma* from the Hindi literature I read during my teen years in Fiji. Thanks to one of my cousins who was studying in Delhi then, I got to visit two of his *girmitya* relatives in Uttar Pradesh.

My second visit to India in 1995 was even less successful as far as search for my ancestral villages was concerned. I did not even get to go to Uttar Pradesh on this occasion. During my third visit to India, this time from Sydney, Australia, I did manage to establish a contact that eventually helped me to trace family members of my paternal grandmother in Balrampur, Uttar Pradesh. I captured this visit in my second documentary film on *girmitya* in India, which I named *Milaap: A Royal Discovery*.

Meeting the relatives of my *aaji*, my paternal grandmother, and visiting the village where she was born was one of the most memorable events of my entire life. Sitting with my newly found Indian relatives on the courtyard where my *aaji* once lived before getting married. I felt that the soul of my *aaji* had finally returned with me to her home. I tried to picture my *aaji*'s life there before she was married and taken away to her husband's home not too far away from there. I silently thanked my *aaji* for guiding me back to my home, my *matrabhumi*. I realised that this was a home that no military coup can take away from me. I felt connected with the thousands of years of the unbroken Indian civilisation that my *girmitya* grandparents were once a part of.

Fifteen years later, sitting in the courtyard of my maternal grandfather in Lakhimpur, Uttar Pradesh, I experienced the same feeling once again. Growing up in Fiji, my brothers and I were very close to my maternal grandparents, even after my mother died when I was just seven years old. I loved and respected my grandparents who lived in a village not far from Natabua. We grew up with the younger *mamas* and *mausis*, my mother's brothers and sisters. I thought about them, majority of who are no longer with us now, as I sat and conversed with their relatives in India. As we toured the small village and the sugarcane fields in Lakhimpur, I was taken back to my *nana*'s, grandfather's in Vaivai, Fiji. I felt very much at home with my newly found *mamas* there. I captured this visit in a short film *Milaap: Connecting with maternal relatives in UP India*.

For me the world has changed dramatically since I migrated from Fiji in 1980, nearly 40 years ago. The world that looked so vast and inaccessible to me in 1970s, today is a global village in which travelling from one end of the world to the other does not require much money, time or preparation. The aeroplane which once looked like an alien flying object, has today become just another mode of travel from one place to the other. I did not speak on a telephone for most of my teenage life. Even during my university days in Fiji, the main means of communication was through letters. Today there are multiple means to communicate with anyone across the globe. Even a few short years ago no one could contemplate video chats and teleconferencing with multiple people throughout the globe. Yes, the world has changed dramatically in the last 40 years for me and billions of people across the world.

I remember the days when majority of the global population lived and worked in one place throughout their entire lives. They also knew where they would be cremated or buried once they died. Many of them lived in small village or in emerging cities. Many did not travel from one city to the other, except for some important events such as marriage, death or to study. Travelling overseas was a major event and was restricted to a few lucky ones.

For me and for million others, all these have changed now. Travelling overseas to study, work or to live is the norm for millions of people throughout the world. Living and working in multiple countries is also becoming popular these days. Rapid change is in the air around the world. I feel that we should also have to look at the way we define home and identity.

I have had a good look at the academic definition of home and identity as an integral part of my Doctor of Creative Arts degree research which I undertook from 2004 to 2011. As a departure from any academic analysis, in this paper I have confined my analysis to my personal journeys from my childhood living in a tiny village of a small island nation to now living in a global village. While I draw on all my academic studies, I will not rely on anyone else's definition of home and identity. This is because I believe that in this time of unparalleled information available to us, many of us can come to our own views on this subject. I believe that no one knows better than I about my life journeys and search to establish in my mind a sense of homes and identities. This is my own definition and others can either agree with it or disregard it. In this age of mass and multiple migration I am sure this paper will at least provoke a few to examine their own journeys and think about their own versions of home(s) and identity(s).

My journey tells me that there is no one home or one identity for me. During my teenage years in my village and my town (it became a city later), Fiji was my home, but I had little idea about my identity. Identity was not something which was relevant for me at that time. I realised vaguely that I was somehow Indian and that I was somehow connected to India historically. When I went to study in the capital city at age of 18 years, I began to recognise some conflicts between my identity as an Indian and those who called themselves Fijians. I realised that although my parents and I were born in Fiji, somehow, I was not a Fijian. The post 1977 general election events in Fiji muddled this issue even further for me. The Indian leader of the party which had won the election was not allowed to become Fiji's prime minister. Instead, a Fijian leader was imposed as Fiji's prime minister. The same year some Fijians destroyed the Diwali *diyas* we had lit on the grounds of University of South Pacific.

Although I had began to question my identity by then, but when I migrated to Britain in 1980, Fiji was still a home to which I wanted to return after 5 years. That was the deal I had made with my wife as a condition to going to Britain.

For the first 5 years of my life in Britain question of home and identity was not a priority for me. Britain was my temporary home, my *karmabhumi*, for a specific purpose and for a short period of time. In order to survive in the almost all white London Met Police, I had to become *whiter than white* in order to fit in the system and survive. I managed to do that well for first three to four years. However, after that, when my identity as an Asian police officer began to be questioned in highly racialized London of that period, I began questioning my *whiter than white* identity and eventually resigned from Met Police.

As noted above soon after resigning from the Met Police I started my Sociology degree in order to gain better understanding of the society we lived in. I also joined the local labour party and began volunteering in a local anti-racist organisation. By 1991 I had secured a BA degree in Sociology, was elected as a councillor in the local government borough and was appointed as a principal anti-racist officer in a neighbouring borough.

As also noted above, the 1987 coups in Fiji made me to change my view of Fiji as my home. Although it was my *janambhumi*, it was no longer my home. I was could not identify myself as a Fijian in any way, and I also questioned my identity as an Indo-Fijian or a Fijian Indian. As Fiji began to fade from my imagination, Britain felt like my new home, my *karmabhumi*. I still struggled with my identity.

When I migrated from Britain in 1995, I lost my second *karmabhumi*. I was confused once again. I was now unsure of both my identity and home. I was now close to Fiji, my *janambhumi*. The desire to get reconnected with Fiji arose within me once again. I was in that state of mind for nearly eight years. Things began to change after my visit to the village of my maternal grandmother in 2004. I had found my *matrabhumi*, my motherland, and my identity was securely anchored in Uttar Pradesh, India. With that confidence in me, I looked deeply at Australia as my new and permanent *karmabhumi*, the country which was kind to me when I was struggling with so many issues in and around me. Having now established Australia as my permanent home, I felt comfortable to add other countries as my *karmabhumi* as well; countries where I can travel and work for short or long periods, knowing that I had a home back in Australia. I was comfortable with multiple *karamabhumis* now.

The question of my *janambhumi* still plagued me. From 2001 I began to visit Fiji often, first to visit relatives and later for research and filming work. From 2009 to 2012 for the most part Fiji became my *karmabhumi* as well. Unfortunately, a few things contributed towards me deciding in 2012 that Fiji was no longer my home. I have articulated these thoughts in an article *A Home No More*, which can be found on academia.edu website. To summarize, the home where I was born and grew up is now fenced up and owned by someone else. The farms that we nurtured so well is now fully-grown jungle after being reserved by the government, supposedly for the benefit of the native Fijians. I literally lost the home which my parents, my siblings and I had built over the period. Only two members of our extended family now live on our homestead where once some 50-60 people lived side by side in harmony. Once a pristine village where neighbours lived in harmony, is now void of those neighbours and where once lush sugarcane farms added to the scenery, now stands shabby jungle. Travelling far and wide in the largest island of Fiji, I have witnessed similar scenes in many other villages.

The 2006 coup, which at the time of its execution led some of us to believe to be a revolution of sorts, became a military dictatorship. Many of the promises made at the time of the coup was unceremoniously broken. Even after the so-called democratic elections held there, one is forced to admit that Fiji is still ruled like a dictatorship by a few. The hope and recommitment towards Fiji, signalled by the 2006, has now long faded into history. Fiji is no longer a home for me.

However, what cannot be denied is the fact that Fiji is my *janambhumi*, where I was born and had spent my first 23 years. Fiji is, as Professor Satendra Nandan says, is where our umbilical cord is buried; where we walked the land on our bare feet. Fiji often comes in my dreams. A small thing such as smell of a fresh tomato transports me in milliseconds back to the small farms that my brothers and cousins, under the careful watch of my uncle, tended to every morning and afternoon until I went to study in Suva. Sight of coconut, mango, guava and banana trees also instantly reminds me of Fiji. Clear blue sea and white sand recalls Fiji immediately. There are many such objects which triggers memories of Fiji. I cannot ignore all these signals. Once they invoked fond memories of Fiji. Today they are painful reminders of the destruction which have been caused by a few for their own political and economic purposes.

At this stage I do not see any end to Fijis' political situation. In this situation Fiji is not a home for me. It has become a regret now that Fiji is my *janambhumi*. I hope that some common sense would prevail there, and the political, social and economic situation would change for good sooner or later. I wait for the time when I can be proud of my *janambhumi* again.

### **Dr. Satish Rai**



**Dr. Satish Rai is Director, Director-Indian Diaspora Council of Australia Inc. (IDCA.** Dr Satish Rai is Sydney based academic, film/tv producer, journalist and community development worker. He was born in Fiji where he received his primary, secondary and part of his tertiary education (University of South Pacific & Fiji School of Medicine. He migrated to UK in 1980 and after working as a Metropolitan police officer for five years, (1982-1987) he retired to complete his BA (Hons) degree in Sociology, majoring in race equality issues. He became a politician (elected councillor in London Borough of Greenwich, 1990-94), and a community development officer; becoming a Principal Race Equality Officer for a London Borough Council. He is creator of *Raivision Academy of Film, TV & Music*. In 2011, he completed a profession Doctor of Creative Arts degree (in film production) from the same university. This involved making a documentary drama based his research thesis, which was on exile of the Indian girmityas in Fiji. Dr Rai's had made a film based on his research – *In Exile at Home – A Fiji Indian Story*; recipient of prestigious Uttar Pradesh Apravasi Bharatiya Ratna Award.