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Dauka Puran (review)

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(Review)

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highlight of the book. Various wry, sardonic, melodramatic, didactic, subversive, accusatory, despairing, and philosophical, Sanadhya—or rather his scribe, Benarsidas Chaturvedi—manages to turn the plantation anecdote into a genre of resistance writing par excellence. His prose is not always of the highest order, but he has an eye for detail that never fails to impress, and his passing metaphors are at times breathtaking both in accuracy and beauty: “When the rashes on my skin seemed to grow large as a rupee coin, I lit a fire in my room and the mosquitoes disappeared.” Racked by hunger and on the verge of suicide, Sanadhya creates poetry out of suffering. To one who is his spiritual heir, that act is both a strategy for survival and the legacy of a survivor.

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*Dauka Puran*, by Subramani.  
New Delhi: Star Publications, 2001.  
ISBN 81-7650-035-6, 521 pages.  
Written in Indo-Fijian. Distributed by  
University Book Centre, University of  
the South Pacific.

The publication of Subramani's *Dauka Puran* is an important event in the literary and cultural history of the Indo-Fijian community in particular, and of Fiji in general. At over five hundred pages, the novel may also be the longest piece of sustained prose in a vernacular language in the entire written literature of the Pacific Islands. This is no mean achievement. That it is written by a scholar and teacher of English literature makes that achieve-

ment even more remarkable (I have vivid memories of Subramani introducing us in Labasa Secondary School to Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, T S Eliot's *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, and *Hamlet's* soliloquies).

Subramani is not the first Fiji writer to use Fiji-Hindi. Pandit Babu Ram Sharma of Ba published a small book in Fiji-Hindi in the early 1990s, which provides tantalizing glimpses into the inner world of the rural Indo-Fijian community. Around the same time, Raymond Pillay completed his play, *Adhura Sapana* (Unfulfilled Dream). And several other writers have over the years used the language to lend credibility and authenticity to their literary explorations of Indo-Fijian life. But Subramani is the first major writer to exploit fully the creative possibilities of a language often assumed to have no redeeming linguistic features, and to be limited and limiting in its vocabulary and cultural and emotional range. Subramani demonstrates these assumptions to be palpably untrue. This is one of the enduring contributions of the novel.

*Dauka* is a difficult word to translate into English. Very broadly, it could be interpreted to mean a scoundrel or, better still perhaps, a subaltern—at any rate, a person of unremarkable social pedigree, unpretentious, certainly not among the movers and shakers of society. Fiji Lal, an aptly named *dauka*, is the central character of the novel. He was born around the 1930s when the memory of indenture was still fresh in people's minds, in a small village on the outskirts of the town, near the sugar mill on the Qawa River, perhaps in a village like Batinikama where

Subramani himself grew up. It is a mixed village of Hindus and Muslims and North and South Indians, with some Fijians on the outer edges. Fiji Lal is unlettered but intelligent, inventive and resourceful with a wry sense of humor, and above all, an astute judge of people and places around him. Fiji Lal is no fool.

And he is also improbably lucky (although not in love, for the girl of his dreams—Kamini—is lost to him). He begins his career life as a casual employee in the local school, moving on to become a hired hand in the village, a cleaner (*topaz*) in a local European's house, a gardener, and eventually a hawker (courtesy of a man named Nanhu who leaves his shop to him when he dies). Fiji Lal is conscientious at whatever he does, even cleaning toilets: work is work. Didn't Mahatma Gandhi himself clean toilets in South Africa? But Fiji Lal is not content to live as a village hawker, as a big frog in a small pond. So he sells his business, deposits his money in the bank (itself a novel experience for people unused to western institutions), and embarks on a *tiraath*, a pilgrimage, or a journey of personal exploration and discovery. "Go and see the world," a man tells him, "the ways of the world. This is where we fall short. Property, this and that, engrossed in business and before you know it, you have a stroke." Fiji Lal heeds the advice.

He travels without a fixed itinerary or a particular destination in mind. "Go with the flow," we might say. Fiji Lal goes all the way from Labasa to the southern tip of Vanua Levu, to "Sapsap" (Savu Savu) and "Taponi" (Taveuni), to every *anuanu* (nook and

cranny) in the area, while working on a boat for seven years. Later he travels to Suva and from there to the rest of Viti Levu. On his travels he stays with people who are invariably generous to him, who feed him and show him sights, or in *dharam shalas* (community rest houses). Some of the details of the journey may sound improbable—are people still all that generous to strangers, enough to house and feed them for weeks on end? Do such rest houses still exist today? But this is a work of fiction, concerned to uncover the deeper truths of the human experience, not a work of scholarship, and so a certain suspension of disbelief is necessary.

What we see through Fiji Lal's eyes is fascinating. We see a community and a country in transition, from the postwar years to the present. We all know the broad contours of the change caused by urbanization, migration, and the incursion of the modern media, but what the novel does beautifully is to humanize that process, to bring it alive: the thrilling experience of the first car ride, the first trip to town, the first cup of tea or coke in a fly-infested café, the first experience of the cinema (when a group of old-timers, thinking what they were seeing was the real thing, cause a commotion and begin to pray in the aisle when Hindu gods and goddesses appear on the screen!), the first bemused experience of listening to the radio, the first time a freezer arrives in the village, the first Tilley lamp.

Fiji Lal meets interesting characters on his travels: rogues, rascals, and fraudulent men preying on others, besides decent folk going about their business. The Indo-Fijian community

has its full share of all of them. Some of the conversations are very funny indeed, especially when rendered in rustic Fiji-Hindi. For example, Alipate (a Fijian whom people call Ali for short) says to Fiji Lal, “Industaani log amme Ali bolo. Um aapan marama se batao, um musulman baito, sako chaar aurat rako [Indians call me Ali. I tell my wife, I am a Muslim, I can keep four wives!]” (343). Alipate’s wife is keen on Hindi movies. Alipate does not mind, for he has an agenda of his own. “Kaali mango Indi filum deko. Jab taun jao, kaali filum, filum karo. Um bolo koi baat nahi, jao. Kali deko kaiindia log kaise kaana banao [All he wants his wife to do is to learn from the films how Indian people prepare their food]” (343). On another occasion, a politician arrives in the village asking for “bot” (vote). Fiji Lal asks his father what the politician will do with a “bot.” “How do I know? Maybe he will sit in the ‘bot’ and do whatever he wants to do” (201). It is the creative use of Fiji-Hindi, with frequent, deliberate exaggerations for comic effect, that lends the book its untranslatable charm and character.

Some might question whether there is a such a thing as a “standard” version of Fiji-Hindi. Today, thanks to increased mobility, intermarriages, and common schooling, there probably is. The regional and subcultural variations are not as marked as they once were. Subramani uses the Labasa variety, more specifically the language spoken a generation ago by people like my father. There are words here that all Labasans will recognize because Viti Levuans use them to measure the level of our social sophis-

tication (which they invariably find wanting!): *bakeda* (crabs), *daabe* (flood), *belo* (men’s or guest house), *awa-gawa* (come-go, as opposed to *aye-gaye* or *aise-gaise*). And there are words here that I have not heard for decades, words which have almost disappeared from common use: *kakkus* (toilet), *bhucchad* (silly, stupid), *chachundar* (loose woman, a flirt), *bhong* (dumb), *lokum* (“lock-’em,” or jail), *behuda* (fool), *jauhua* (con man). And the names of people—Ghurau, Kallan, Jhagru, Baljod, Paina, Kosa, Bhagirathi—now seem vaguely funny. But these names were common in villages in the postwar period.

*Dauka Puran* reveals to us the world of an Indo-Fijian village community that has almost vanished beyond recall: its rituals, ceremonies, superstitions, supernatural practices, and witchcraft (*jadu tona*), little things that bound people together as a cohesive community. For most people now, the institution of the *panchayat* (village council) would be a remote memory, as would be the festival of *Tazia*, or Mohurram, celebrated in honor of Prophet Mohamad’s murdered grandsons. Not many will remember the time when Indo-Fijian women wore Indian jewelry such as *tanzeb*, *nainsukh*, *motia*, and *mohur*. Subramani is chronicling a world in transition, facing disintegration, as leases expire and people move away. In the face of such massive upheaval and pain, the past does not look too bad. “Tell me, weren’t those the good old days?” Ghurau asks Fiji Lal. “Well, you know, that was the time of the British raj. Europeans ruled us. We had a good life. Since this

country has become independent, we have had one problem after another. Prices of things have gone up. There's theft and burglary everywhere. You can't even trust your neighbours." Ghurau asks, "And the land problem? How will that be solved?" "Another girmit," Fiji Lal replies matter of factly, "There is little hope" (306).

*Dauka Puran* is an important novel and a significant social and cultural text. I hope it will inspire others to record their own impressions and recollections in a language whose enormous creative possibilities Subramani has laid before us.

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*Faces of the Spirits: The Sulka People of Papua New Guinea.* 27 minutes, VHS, color, 2001. Produced and directed by Caroline Yacoe. Distributed by Pacific Pathways, Honolulu. US\$95.00.

Filmed in Wide Bay, East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea, in the Sulka villages of Taimtop, Guma, Kilalum, and Wawas, producer-director Caroline Yacoe's film highlights the magnificent red Sulka spirit-being masks. The film appears to be a collaborative work with a (scripted) voice-over narrative and (unscripted) comments and descriptions of the masks and their meanings provided by Sulka villagers. Yacoe's artistic collector's eye focuses on the masks as objects expressive of Sulka identity and way of life in a changing world. The film assumes a chronological structure: the first part looks at

"traditional" masks and ceremonies in Taimtop village; then, with a brief nod to Papua New Guinea's colonial history as a source of change, it segues into part two in Wawas village, where the opening of a new church and a mortuary ceremony exemplify "contemporary" syncretic expressions of masks and Sulka identity.

The film shows effectively the breathtaking, intricately carved and woven spirit-being mask (*hemlaut*) with its mushroom shaped "hat"—nearly two meters in diameter—made of barkcloth (*tapa*) or, nowadays, cotton sheeting. The hat is decorated on its top and underside with designs depicting clan affiliations, nature spirits, or dreamed symbols, which the dancer shows off by bending and rolling the hat's edge on the ground. The mask's full-length green coconut frond skirt rustles and swishes to great effect visually and aurally as the dancer twists from side to side. The whole ensemble, easily a meter taller than the tallest person, is judged according to the brilliant sheen of artfully painted designs, the fresh and brightly colored leaves, and the masked dancer's performance. The beauty of the whole experience prompts onlookers to leap and dance and shout their exuberant appreciation.

This aesthetically pleasing whole (splendid masks, dancing, singing, drumming, feasting) is indicative of the harmony present between human and supernatural beings. The masks represent a "unique expression of order" whose presence restores community balance by (re)affirming and (re)establishing social roles. Narrator Titilia Babour explains that the masks