

AFTER 125 YEARS, FIJI'S INDO-FIJIANS IN RETREAT

By Sanjay Ramesh

A majority of Fiji Indians are the descendants of the indentured laborer, who were brought to Fiji as contract workers to develop the colonial sugar economy. The Indians came from different regions, spoke different dialects, and practiced different customs and religions. After coming to Fiji, the Indians were constantly rebelling against the colonial system, which regulated social discourse on the plantation through a draconian Immigration Ordinance, European overseers, and the colonial judiciary. In the end the Indenture experience created a culture of rebellion among the Indians and their siblings: the Indo-Fijians. The decision by the girmityas to stay in Fiji after the end of Indenture ushered in a new era of physical presence of Indians, who became a significant part of Fiji's demographic and socio-economic life. This is Fiji's Indo-Fijian fact.

After the final indenture contracts were rescinded in 1920, the Indians rebelled against the colonial state. The disturbances of 1920-21, 1941, and 1959-60 were attempts to challenge the colonial order, which saw Indians as a 'problem'. But post-Indenture Fiji Indians fragmented into rival religious, social, and political factions and this had a devastating impact on the Indian rebellious consciousness. All that could be achieved from anti-colonial activism was 'token' reforms from the establishment, which incorporated certain Indian demands, including political representation.

The Fijian colonial system was designed to cater to the interests of the eastern indigenous Fijian chiefs, the European settlers and investors, and above all the British Empire. Indians were a necessary labor resource, which sustained Fiji as well as other British colonies economic infrastructure. Demands for a common roll by the Indian leaders in Fiji in the late 1920s were viewed by the colonial authorities as a serious challenge to European dominance, inspired primarily by Indian nationalists, who saw exploitation of Indian labor for colonial economy no wit inferior to slavery. Nationalist emissaries were sent to British colonies in the early twentieth century to organize Indian indentured workers and agitate for change. As more Indian leaders in Fiji pushed for a greater political and economic share, the colonial government counter-pushed even harder to stereotype and vilify the Indian community. Seeing Indian political activism on the rise, the colonial authorities strengthened its ties with indigenous Fijian chiefs. After all, it was chiefs who had ceded Fiji to Britain in 1874.

The Indenture Experience

The first Governor to Fiji devised a paternalistic system of native administration, which spared the indigenous Fijians from the destructive forces of colonial capitalism. To ensure that the Fijian way of life was preserved, Gordon instituted the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) as the 'official' custodian of native custom and tradition. The Council campaigned on behalf of indigenous Fijians and requested the colonial government to stop using growing but small army of Fijian laborer. According to the chiefs, the rigors of plantation life destroyed the "Fijian way of life", which was based on communal mode of production. Gordon enthusiastically endorsed the viewpoint of the chiefs, but was mindful of the fact that survival of the Colony of Fiji depended on establishing a viable economy for the islands were located at a great distance from the European trading centers.

Fiji's land and climate was well suited for the establishment of sugar estates and in 1872 the sugar industry was formed. At first the European planters relied on Melanesian Labor

from New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands. But with growing protest against the use of slave Labor in the Pacific, the British government intervened to protect the Islanders from unscrupulous Europeans and traders. British intervention created a serious Labor shortage and the Europeans pressured the colonial administration in Fiji for cheap and an abundant Labor resource.

It was not until 1879 that the Fiji government, under the direction of Governor Sir Arthur Gordon, started to import Indians under the indentured labor scheme, which existed in the British colonies since the 1837. The Indians were to come to Fiji and work for five years and another five as a "Khula" or a free' laborer. The indenture agreement stated that upon the completion of ten years on the colony, the laborer would qualify for a paid trip back to India, and those who did not wish to return could stay in the colony as British subjects.

Fiji's colonial authorities established recruiting offices in Calcutta and from 1905 in South India. The recruiting office hired sub-agents, who were paid to entice gullible and illiterate peasants from India's United Provinces or Uttar Pradesh."Recruiters played on the ignorance of the peasants saying for instance that Fiji was a place near Calcutta; or exaggerated the value of the wages to be earned whilst saying nothing about the penal nature of the indenture contract"

The Indian laborer came mostly from North India, because it was a chief recruiting ground for other Sugar colonies (Mauritius, British Guyana, Trinidad, Natal, Surinam.etc). North India also had a high concentration of agricultural castes, which had experience in rigorous Labor under India's harsh climate. While the colonial regime in Fiji was targeting physically fit men, they neglected the number of female intake. This caused enormous problems on the plantation: competition for a sexual partner resulted in suicide and murder. Brij Lal notes that in the case of Fiji, there were altogether 13,696 females and 31,458 males transported during the period of indentured emigration.

Indian women who emigrated to Fiji were believed to be fleeing social scorn in India. But in Fiji, women were exploited by the male laborer as well as the colonial overseers. The result was high suicide rate and violence against women. Between 1885 and 1920, 96 indentured immigrants in Fiji were murdered of whom 68 were women and 28 men. It is the plight of the indentured women that provided anti-indenture activists with 'moral' reasons to condemn the Labor traffic. Two most publicized stories of European sexual oppression were the lascivious attack on Kunti and Naraini . The anti-indenture activists-Totaram Sanadhya, Indian journalist Benarsidas Chaturvedi, C.F. Andrews, and Mahatma Ghandi-pressured for an immediate end to indenture. To avoid further criticisms, the British colonial administrators cancelled the Labor scheme in 1916.

The end of indenture was a relieved welcome for the anti-indenture activists. But what was going to happen to the Indians abroad? From 1879 to 1916, some 16,000 indentured laborers were brought to Fiji. A few returned to India, but most stayed and established permanent homes. Once the Indians were released from the authoritarian Labor system, they diverted their attention to other pressing issues: better living conditions, wages, and above all political participation and representation. For the Indians in Fiji the struggle was now for recognition of their Labor and self-respect.

In 1916,the Indians were partly successful in their struggle for political representation. Responding to the pressure from the Fiji Indians and India, the government appointed an Indian colonial sympathizer, Badri Maharaj, to the Legislative Council. The reason for a nominated Indian member for it provided hope to the colonial authorities in Fiji that India

would resume sending laborer to Fiji, despite anti-indenture activism by Indian nationalists. But by 1920, India exhausted all avenues for acquiring labor, and the indentured system became a thing of the past.

Free from the shackles of indenture, Indians in Fiji became a growing social and economic force and organizational skills on the plantation was quickly replicated to organize in other sectors.

Indian Activism

Among the activists who came from India to Fiji was the lawyer Manilal Maganlal Doctor in 1912. As a champion of Indian rights abroad, Manilal established in Fiji the Indian Imperial Association. Its aim was to watch the interests of and to assist in the general improvement of the Indian community in Fiji. The activities of Manilal created uneasiness among the affluent Europeans, who saw him as an agent of Indian nationalism, trying to stir up revolt among the Indians. In a letter to the Fiji Times and Herald, the Europeans complained that the Indian Imperial Association was a 'quasi-secret society' consisting of Manilal, George Suchit, Ram Singh, and about a dozen of their personal friends. What probably bothered the Europeans the most was the challenge to the municipal ordinance, which was amended to make voter registration conditional upon the ratepayer proving literacy in the English language. Manilal was striking at the heart of the colonial organisation that excluded the Indians through imposition of racist preconditions.

By January 15, 1920, Indian discontent with the colonial government exploded in a strike of Public Works Department and Municipal workers. The strike was caused by dissatisfaction at the rise in the cost of living during and after the first great war. The strike turned ugly when strikers turned to sabotage: telephone wires between Suva and Nausori were disconnected, bridges were sabotaged, and on 12th February, police with fixed bayonets dispersed a stone-throwing crowd at Nausori.

In the 1920 strike, Fijians were enlisted to assist the colonial government in restoring calm. The colonial regime moved quickly against the strike leaders and Manilal was deported. In a dispatch to London, Governor Rodwell justified the deportation by stating that Manilal was "regarded beyond all reasonable doubt as the prime mover in the agitation". Manilal was removed but a more serious trouble was brewing in the canefields of North-West Viti Levu.

In January 1921 another strike started in the sugar areas of the Western Viti Levu. The strike was led by a Sadhu (priest) Basist Muni. He challenged the hegemony of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) and asked for wage increases. Sadhu argued that the CSR made huge profits by exploiting Indian workers and was responsible for the miserable social conditions, which forced Indians to live in abject poverty. The colonial regime intervened and persuaded the sugar company to grant moderate wage increases. But the strike, which lasted for six months, quickly took a more political posture. Basist Muni demanded an unconditional return of Manilal and the 1920 strikers from the Suva gaol. Immediately, the colonial authorities labeled the Sadhu as an anti-government agitator and deported him from Fiji.

Before his deportation, Basist Muni predicted that lightning would strike the government building in Suva and burn it to the ground. The prediction came true as the Fiji government building was desecrated by lightning. Sadhu was a mystical figure and spoke English and Hindi fluently. The two strikes hardened colonial attitudes towards the

Indians. As a result, the Europeans established a common stand with the Fijian chiefs against Indian encroachment into social, economic, and political field.

At first, the Indians were seen as sugar producing machine. But after the strikes of 1920-21, the Indians became a problem for the colonial government. If unchecked, these Indians could contaminate the whole island with their anti-establishment ideas. Fiji's colonial administrators argued persistently that Indians wanted to establish an Indian government in Fiji by using their ever-increasing population. In 1921, there were 60,634 Indians in the colony of Fiji but by 1936, the number had increased to 85,002.

The strikes of 1920-21 politicised the Indian community, and there was a call for elected Indian members to the Legislative Council. Badri Maharaj, the first Indian appointee to the Council, was despised by the Indian community as a traitor. By 1929, the colonial government conceded to the Indian demand and allowed the election of Vishnu Deo, James Ramchandrar and Parmanand Singh. The newly elected Indian members of the Legislative Council requested common roll, based on representation by population as opposed to established practices of communal representation.

The calls for a common roll was particularly troubling for the Europeans, who believed that the Indians wanted to use their numerical superiority to obtain political power. But the Indians were not so much after political control. They, nevertheless, wanted a system where their needs were adequately championed. By leaving the Indians on the fringes of political participation, the colonial administration heightened their sense of insecurity, which was building up since indenture.

Internal divisions within Fiji Indians

The Fiji Indians were united despite their diversity of origin and caste to fight and end the indenture system. After the collapse of indenture, Indians, especially the Hindus in Fiji, indulged in acrimonious debates on morality and religion. The two groups to emerge from the Fiji Hindu community were Arya Samaj and Sanatan Dharam. The Arya Samaj was a reform movement aimed at ridding the Hindu community in Fiji from priest dominance and expensive religious rituals. The Samaj was in favour of widow remarriage, against child marriage, and scornful of almost entire corpus of Hindu myths, epics, and scriptures.

The Sanatan Dharam advocated quite a different religious and social agenda to that of the Samajis. Respect for a wide range of religious writings, support for child marriage, criticism of widow remarriage. Pundit Vishnu Deo and K.B. Singh were Arya Samaj activists. Vishnu Deo was born in Navua and got involved with the Samaj activities after reading the writings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj in India. K.B. Singh on the other hand was India-born and was inspired by Samaji philosophy of modern Hinduism. The Arya Samaj project in Fiji, as in India, began with preachers, teachers and schools. The Samajis created new conditions of possibility with establishment of its newspapers, especially Fiji Samachar in 1923. Samaji missionary like Shri Krishna Sharma toured the country and held public meetings, where poetic language was used to emphasise the utility of educating women and learning English.

The Sanatan Dharam members were concerned about Samaj activities and in an attempt to establish support, Sanatanis challenged the Samajis for a grand debate on religion and morality. During the debate, the Samaj activists made racist remarks at the Muslim community. In 1929, Arya Samaj called for a forceful conversion of Muslims to Hinduism. This created turmoil among the Muslim community as Muslim leaders looked

towards the colonial government for help. “The Fiji Muslim League formed in 1926 argued that the Arya Samajis were anti-Muslim and accused the Samaji leaders for hate mongering.”

Sanatan Dharam missionaries, Ram Chandra Sharma and Murarilal Shastri, sympathized with the Muslim fears of Samaji extremism and urged Hindus to exercise religious tolerance. The colonial government associated itself with the Sanatanis, who also held moderate political views as opposed to the militant Arya Samaj. At a special gathering of Samajis and Sanatanis, Pundit Vishnu Deo ridiculed Hindu deities and published what the government believed obscene excerpts from Hindu scriptures. Vishnu Deo was eventually charged and forced to vacate his seat in the Legislative Assembly. Nevertheless, the bitterness between the Sanatanis and Samajis continued throughout the late 1920s. However, the colonial government’s decision to encourage Indian immigration in the 1930s caused many who were now Fiji born Indo-Fijians to argue against open immigration.

The question of Fiji-born and India-born started to split the Indian community in Fiji. In the 1920s, two known Indian political leaders, A.D. Patel and S.B. Patel came to Fiji and championed unrestricted immigration from India. But Fiji born Indians objected and from here onwards Indo-Fijians started to emphasise differences between descendants of indenture and those who arrived as immigrants. By 1930, the colonial government moved to restrict free migrants and appointed a committee to examine its open immigration policy towards India.

The anti-immigration campaign was led by Fiji-born Parmanand Singh, who argued persistently on the economic strengthen of the new migrants, who became lenders and small business operators. The lenders, in particular, were accused of unscrupulous lending practices and fraud. Since immigrants from India came with capital, they were in a structurally advantageous position, especially in electoral contests. Most notably perhaps, the inability of the new migrants, mostly Gujeratis and Punjabis, to forge cordial relationship with Indo-Fijians and change rigid caste practices.

World War II and Fiji Indians

Debates over morality, religion and immigration were overtaken by the events of World War II. On one hand, the militarisation of elements of the Indian nationalist movement in India caused Fiji colonial government to express grave misgivings on Indo-Fijian loyalty. Whilst Indo-Fijians or Fiji-born were against the Nazi and Japanese expansionism, the India-born, after engineering themselves to prominent positions in the farming sector, saw the war as an opportunity to strike at the heart of the colonial government. In fact, the colonial government wanted to enlist Indian men for services in the Solomon Islands, but the recruitment of Indian soldiers was short-lived.

In 1939, Arya Samaj supporters formed Kisan Sangh: a cane grower’s organization, which worked with the CSR to improve wages and working conditions of farmers. But some Indian farmers and leaders, A.D. Patel and Rudranand, denounced the Kisan Sangh and formed a rival militant Maha Sangh in 1941. In the middle of a war, Kisan Sangh started a disastrous negotiation with the CSR on wage issues. By 1943, Kisan Sangh expressed disappointment with CSR negotiators and threatened strike action after the end of the war. However, Maha Sangh saw the Kisan Sangh position as disgraceful and convinced illiterate Indian farmers to take strike action straightaway. The manipulation by Maha Sangh of the farmers and the strike during the height of the war convinced both

the colonial government and the Great Council of Chiefs that Indians were disloyal and manipulative. Worse perhaps was the refusal by many Fiji Indians to join the army for political reason. Fijians on the other hand contributed heroically as soldiers in the war effort. Not only did Fiji Indians refused to enlist for service overseas in protest over unequal pay and conditions, they also engaged in a long and bitter strike in sugar areas over cane prices.

The resentment towards the Fiji Indians is well articulated by J.C. Furnas. Indians usually disdains marriage with the Fijian, relies too much on the new Indian nationalism for emotional ballast, and spend much of his political energy toward social and economic gains, directly at the Fijian's expense. During World War II, Indians made unhappily sure of being detested by staging large-scale strikes in the sugar fields. As yet, only a limited stratum of Indian young people tries to consider themselves people of Fiji, rather than Indians justifiably sulking under exploitation in a foreign land.

Furnas made it clear that Fijian and Indian interests were antagonistic and the Indian non-participation in the war efforts in World War II was due to a lack of attachment of Fiji Indians to Fiji. Forty-four years later, this argument was re-invented during the 1987 coups by the coup conspirators to argue in favour of the removal of "Indian-dominated" Bavadra Government. It was after the war that the Fiji Europeans realized that Indian population boom would soon result in Indian political domination. European members of the Legislative Council-A.A.Ragg, R.W. Robson, and A.W. Macmillan- suggested repatriating all Fiji Indians, beginning with sixteen-year-old males and fourteen year old females.

The effort of Europeans in Fiji to repatriate Indians failed. However, the next strategy was to invoke the Deed of Cession and get the indigenous Fijians to support European political hegemony, which was the only political group that could guarantee preservation of indigenous culture. India-born leaders such as A.D. Patel tried to convince indigenous Fijians not to support the Europeans. But he never succeeded.

Fiji Indians in Retreat

The strike in the cane fields in 1960 had all the hallmarks of the 1943 strike. This strike became political when A.D. Patel pushed for security of tenure on land leased to Indian farmers by the indigenous land owning units. Moreover, A.D. Patel advocated a common roll electoral system and independence, which was seen by the newly established indigenous lobby, Fijian Association, as another ploy by Indians to use its majority to affect political change, contrary to the wishes of the vanua. In 1964, A.D. Patel, James Madhavan, and S.M. Koya formed the Federation Party.

Despite overwhelming support for the Federation among Fiji Indians, other Indian leaders attacked A.D. Patel for rushing towards independence. However, Indo-Fijians, descendants of giritiyas, argued for full Fiji citizenship following independence and suggested those on Indian passport to be given temporary immigration visas. Finally, Fiji Indians were bitterly divided at independence. The debates on morality, religion, immigration, independence, and disputes in the cane fields left an impression of a community divided along social, cultural and linguistic groups, united only occasionally by its insecurities, an abiding sense of injustice, and the political equality and self respect.

In 1969, A.D. Patel passed away and the mantle of Indo-Fijian leadership fell on Fiji-born Siddiq Koya, who came under immense political pressure to continue with the

hardline politics of Patel. By 1970, it became clear that Koya was willing to work with Fijian leadership, resulting in the finalisation of the 1970 Constitution. Eventhough the constitution was communally based, it provided, nevertheless, equal political participation, based on First Past the Post Voting System.

Post Independence Indo-Fijian Politics

Under the leadership of Siddiq Koya, Indo-Fijians entered the 1972 election as a divided community. Despite attempts to woo indigenous Fijian votes, the National Federation Party failed to win majority of the seats. Following the election defeat, the National Federation Party pressured Prime Minister Ratu Mara to implement common roll electoral system based on one person one vote. This was particularly troublesome to indigenous Fijians because Indo-Fijians were a growing majority and continuing demands from the Indo-Fijian leaders on the issue was seen by nationalists as an attempt to disenfranchise indigenous Fijians and to alienate native land.

By 1977, National Federation Party secured itself as the communal voice of Indo-Fijians in Fiji and in a surprise turn of events, Federation won the 1977 general elections. But while Indo-Fijians fully supported the party, rank and file members that formed the party cadre were bitterly divided. The National Federation Party victory was short-lived as divisions within the party started to take its toll. For two-days, Federation party officials argued relentlessly on next steps and one of the newly elected Indo-Fijian members, Jai Ram Reddy, publicly stated that there was nobody in the National Federation Party with the stature to lead the country.

Unable to form a government, the National Federation Party fractured along cultural and religious lines. The party was unable to function and as a result lost the general elections, giving political power back to Ratu Mara's Alliance Party. Immediately afterwards, Jai Ram Reddy became the leader of the National Federation Party after Siddiq Koya lost his seat due to factional in-fighting. Reddy was unable to stop the political machinery of Ratu Mara's Alliance Party and lost the 1982 elections, even after forming an alliance with the regional indigenous separatist movement called Western United Front (WUF).

By 1985, Indo-Fijian frustration with the National Federation Party had grown and a new political party, the Fiji Labor Party, was formed by Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian trade unionists. In the 1987 elections, the Fiji Labor Party formed a coalition with the dying National Federation Party and was successful in dislodging Ratu Mara's Alliance Party. This single success for multiracial unity was shattered by the coups of 1987. Indo-Fijians were targeted by the coup supporters at all levels of government and pro-indigenous Fijian Taukei Movement rioted in the streets of Suva.

Indo-Fijians in large numbers migrated overseas as Methodist fundamentalist imposed Sunday ban with the help of the military government. The multiracial 1970 constitution was quickly torn up and in its place a pro-indigenous Fijian Constitution was implemented. The events of 1987 decimated the Indo-Fijian community. While many skilled professionals migrated, others became frightened of political participation. A new racial contract was drawn up in the name of indigenous rights as Indo-Fijians were relegated to permanent opposition in a new parliament, which convened following the May 1992 general elections.

Realizing that the political superstructure has become exclusionary, Indo-Fijian leaders focused entirely on the sugar industry. Militancy in the cane field, a hallmark of Indo-Fijian political history after indenture, returned with the assistance of the new National

Farmers Union (NFU). In 1976, the Agricultural Landlord and Tenants Act (ALTA) provided a new lease of life to the Indo-Fijian farmers, but by 1997 this lease would run out. In total 45 agricultural leases expired in 1997; 157 in 1998; 209 in 1999; 1622 in 2000; and 1762 in 2001.

Indo-Fijians remained divided in the 1990s, splitting votes evenly between the National Federation Party and the Fiji Labor Party. However by 1999, Indo-Fijians had snubbed the leader of the National Federation Party, Jai Ram Reddy, for engaging in political partnership with Sitiveni Rabuka, who remains accused of causing pain and suffering to the Indo-Fijian community in 1987 and beyond. Interestingly, though, it was Sitiveni Rabuka who fought off hardliners within his party to push through, with the support of Indo-Fijians, an internationally acceptable 1997 Constitution.

It was under this constitution that the Fiji Labor Party won the 1999 general elections and Mahendra Chaudhry became Fiji's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister. On 19 May 2000, armed gunmen incapacitated the Government of Mahendra Chaudhry.

The crisis created by the armed hijacking of parliament had far reaching impact for Indo-Fijians in remote and rural areas, where support for the armed insurrection was strongest. A number of Indo-Fijians were attacked by indigenous Fijians in rural Fiji, including Muaniweni, Dawasamu, Wainibokasi, Dreketi, Korovou, and Tailevu. Many fled with their belongings to the Fiji Girit Centre in Lautoka. The center, which was the symbol of celebrating Indo-Fijian culture in Fiji, was transformed into a refugee camp.

Another mass exodus of Indo-Fijians in thirteen years started and is continuing because Indo-Fijians do not have any confidence in the current indigenous Fijian government, despite assurances that the events of 1987 and 2000 will not repeat. Most problematic are thoughts that Indo-Fijians may become caught in power struggles within the indigenous Fijian community, which is quick to lash out at Indo-Fijians for the push effects of economic globalization and modernization.

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