

# The Fiji Archipelago





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## Introduction

The Fiji archipelago lies scattered over 250,000 square miles in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. In a recently published book, Shubha Singh (a fourth generation descendant of a family of indentured labourers who had gradually transferred back to India) has written a graphic account of this country. According to her, it is believed that the people of Tonga, one of Fiji's nearest neighbours, used to know these islands by the name of the largest one in the group – Viti Levu. But the Tongan pronunciation of 'Viti' apparently sounded like 'Feejee' and that is the name that has stuck to it. This archipelago, which consists of about 300 islands, ranges from low-lying coral islets with nothing but a few coconut trees on them, to lush green islands encircled by shimmering sands that yield place to thickly forested volcanic mountains. As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, seafaring European adventurers had begun to explore these mysterious regions in search of new lands to exploit. Captain James Cook, the 'discoverer' of the Hawaiian Islands, which later became his grave, had recorded sighting Fiji as early as 1774. It was here that the rebellious crew of the ill-fated mutiny on the *Bounty* was said to have cast off Captain Bligh. Another castaway from another ship - Oliver Slater - subsequently managed to escape from these islands after discovering in them many precious sandalwood groves – a discovery that served as a magnet for droves of subsequent European adventurers who then traded their trinkets for its sandalwood and thus made enormous profits.

- 22.2. This seemingly peaceful and remote region, so reminiscent of a seaside Shangrila, has been for the Indian Diaspora that was unsuspectingly introduced on it in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the unlikely scene of immense suffering. After a brief account of Fiji and its native inhabitants, this chapter relates the story of the induction of Indians into Fiji as indentured labour. It then chronicles the tortured years that followed their arrival in the archipelago, their heroic efforts to restore a semblance of normality in their lives after completing their contractual period, and the subsequent arrival there for permanent settlement of 'free Indians'. A subsequent section describes the sad tale of how, with the gradual improvement of their socio-economic conditions in their country of permanent settlement, the PIOs found themselves increasingly marginalised in a hostile milieu that made them feel unwelcome, notwithstanding their sterling contributions to the

development of the archipelago. The chapter concludes with a reference to the difficult political situation that has currently overtaken the Indian community in Fiji.

### **Fiji Before the Arrival of the British Settlers**

- 22.3. On the basis of inconclusive archaeological evidence, some people believe that the Fiji archipelago was inhabited by waves of Melanesian people about 3,000 years ago. On the other hand, contemporary school textbooks in Fiji apparently state that the ancestors of present day Fijians came from Africa. Whatever their historic origin, the natives of Fiji are essentially a Melanesian people, possibly with a strong mixture of Polynesians. They are generally very tall, dark in complexion, and have muscular bodies. When the first European traders, whalers and missionaries happened to sight these islands, they found them in a state of anarchy with native tribes and chiefdoms vying for supremacy with clubs and spears. In the course of time, an adventurer named Charles Savage, who had been shipwrecked in Fijian waters, is credited with having introduced them to the destructive power of guns. He soon became a high-ranking warrior in the retinue of the chiefs of Bau, an island off the coast of Viti Levu.
- 22.4. Many years later, Seru Cacobau, the young Chief or *Ratu* of the Bau tribe, was able to win the support of some of the Europeans who had established themselves on the island of Ovalau. They had 'bought' land to set up coconut plantations to replace the sandalwood forests that had already disappeared. The Fijians could not understand the European concept of land ownership as, according to their own customs and tradition, land belonged to the entire community. Having won the support of some of the Europeans, Cacobau began to consider himself as the leading Chief in the Fiji islands and called himself *Tui Viti* or King of Fiji. – a title that was not universally recognised. When some Fijians plundered the American Consul's house after it had caught fire in 1846, the American government insisted that it was his responsibility to pay reparations – or face the consequences - as he called himself King of Fiji! Harassed in this manner from time to time, both by other Chiefs and by foreign settlers, Cacobau decided to seek the reluctant protection of any European power that was willing to accept his offer of cession. Finally, a Deed of Cession was signed on 10 October 1874 whereby Fiji became a Crown Colony of Great Britain. In requesting the British emissary to convey his love to Her Majesty Queen Victoria, he is reported to have told him that he fully confided in her and in her sons. He added for good measure, that her successors would also become 'kings of Fiji, to exercise a watchful control over the welfare of his children and people who, having survived the barbaric law and age, are now submitting themselves under Her Majesty's rule, to civilisation.' Meanwhile, in 1854, he had been persuaded to embrace Christianity and today, the indigenous people of Fiji are all Christians.

### **The Advent of Indentured and of 'Free' Indians to Fiji**

- 22.5. The British planters who had arrived in Fiji by the early 1860s soon discovered that cotton cultivation was going to be very profitable for them. This was because of civil war in the United States, which had disrupted cotton exports from that country. They tried initially to employ the

natives of the Fiji islands to work in their cotton plantations. But that did not turn out to be feasible as the Fijians were unwilling to move away from their homes to provide the labour needed to work in far-flung plantations. Accordingly, the planters then imported workers to assist them from the other Pacific Islands such as New Hebrides, the Solomon Islands, Gilbert, Kingsmill and Tokelau. They hoped that the labour inducted from there would not feel tempted to abscond frequently from their work stations as they would have no families near by to distract them. But apparently, that experiment also failed and they were constrained to dispense with the labour that they had imported from those islands.

- 22.6. With the gradual revival of American cotton production, and with the collapse of the French market after the Franco-Prussian war, many of the planters wanted to switch to sugarcane cultivation. But owing to the shortage of labour, they were often constrained to live from hand to mouth. After the British annexation of Fiji in 1874, however, the colonial government decided to introduce a system of importing indentured labour from India. This was at the instance of Sir Arthur Gordon, the first British Governor, whose earlier career had taken him to places like Mauritius and Trinidad where he had been impressed by the benefits derived by British planters from the system of inducting Indian indentured labour.
- 22.7. Governor Gordon has been characterised by many people as part idealist and part pragmatist. He is generally esteemed in Fiji - by its indigenous population - for his deliberate decision to preserve the Fijian social organisation and the prevailing system of land ownership, as well as the system of local administration by the Fijians themselves under their traditional Chiefs. This entailed also the prohibition of further land alienation. One of his first decisions was the vesting of most of the remaining land, not already possessed by the Crown, with the Fijian communities. He also enjoined restrictions on the engagement of Fijian labour by the planters as he felt that, it would be tantamount to interfering in their traditional life style. All these measures resulted in his getting the voluntary support of the natives who outnumbered the British settlers at that time by 100 to 1!
- 22.8. The first of the sailing ships taking Indian workers to Fiji, the *Leonides*, docked in Fiji on 15 May 1879 with 463 persons. It had been stricken *en route* with cholera and dysentery because of the miserable and unsanitary conditions on board. The last of 87 ships, the *Sutlej-V*, arrived there on 11 November 1916. When the indenture system was finally terminated after considerable opposition in India because of the inhuman treatment meted out to the indentured Indians, a total of almost 61,000 persons are reported to have been transported to Fiji. They had been compelled to work under deplorable conditions on the sugar plantations that had begun to dominate the local economy after the demise of cotton as the preferred cash crop. About 75% of these Indians had been recruited from what are now UP and Bihar, and the remaining 25% from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. As in the case of the indentured labour in South Africa and elsewhere, they had been taken there to work for assigned employers on a five-year contractual agreement. This was referred to as a *girmit* in the popular parlance of the illiterate Indian labour,

who soon came to be referred to as *girmitiyas*. After the contractual period, they were free to move to another employer, or work for themselves. At the end of ten years in the islands, they were entitled to a free passage back to India if they so desired. But most of them neither returned to India nor remained in the plantations to which they had been assigned initially. Instead, they preferred to settle down wherever they could find land to cultivate on their own with the new skills that they had acquired.

- 22.9. The British colonists soon discovered that it was going to be difficult to maximise profits by extending their plantations to new areas due to the dearth of locally available capital to finance them. Accordingly, the Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company ('CSRC') was encouraged by the colonial government to enter the picture from 1880. In spite of the principle of native land ownership laid down by Gordon, the CSRC was initially allowed to purchase a thousand acres of prime land, with the option to acquire another thousand. By the 1920s it had come to own almost all the plantations and sugar mills in the Fiji islands. Owing to the problems encountered in managing such extensive estates in a centralised manner, the company soon initiated a scheme of small farmer cultivation. Its vast holdings were divided into 10-12 acre blocks and offered under contract to Indian labourers as and when they had completed their compulsory period of indenture. These lessees had to plant the land with cane under the supervision of company officials and sell it to the company at an agreed price. This meant that they had to adopt the latest cultivation and harvesting methods that had been introduced into Fiji by the CSRC. As the scheme developed and prospered, the company's supervision was relaxed and the organisation of their farms was left more and more to the lessees themselves.
- 22.10. In the initial period of indenture, the Indian expatriates in Fiji had been fully occupied in trying to find their feet in an alien land, and under hostile and unsympathetic conditions. The proportion of women to men was totally skewed during that period. A settled family life was impossible in the barracks provided to them by the planters. The different castes and even the more distinctive religious differences between Hindus and Muslims had become dimmed by having to live together, and thus compelled to forget the divisions that had separated them in India. Christian missionaries from Britain and elsewhere, who had succeeded in converting most of the Fijians to one or other of the various Christian sects, had little effect on the Indian settlers who remained loyal to what they recalled of their ancient religions and traditional customs.
- 22.11. Gradually, 'free immigrants' (corresponding to the 'passenger Indians' of South Africa) began to arrive from India to seek their fortunes. Along with returning former indentured labourers, they represented a wide spectrum of various professions. Some of them were farmers from the Punjab; others were Gujarati craftsmen and traders. There were also religious teachers among them, even a few lawyers. The local government or private employers brought in clerks, policemen, artisans, gardeners, doctors and school teachers. These waves of voluntary immigrants were endowed with better education and had greater material resources at their command, with which to start a new life on the islands. Already by 1920 there were two or three thousand of them. With



their arrival in Fiji, there was a revival among the earlier Indian settlers, of the complex social structure existing in India. And very soon, there was also an awakening of political awareness and a desire to remedy their skewed position in the country's civic and political life. A former indentured labourer and self-educated *sanatani* priest, Totaram Sanadaya of Rewa and later, Manilal Mohanlal Doctor who had come from Mauritius, provided leadership to the Indian community. But by this time the problems of the Indian settlers had mounted considerably.

## The Souring of Inter-racial Relations

- 22.12. The British planters resented the Indian immigrants – both the former indentured labourers as well as the free Indians who had arrived subsequently. This was partly due to the fact that those who had obtained land leases from the CSRC had been selling their cane to it at a much lower price than what the white planters were willing to offer. The white colonists looked down on the frugal life style of the Indians, whom they branded as dirty and unhygienic. They tried to keep the native Fijians and the Indo-Fijians apart as much as possible, not even permitting the establishment of racially mixed schools. They resented the political activism of the PIOs and their urge to protect their *izzat* and their *swabhiman*. They considered their fight for civic and political equality as presumptuous. Their overall attitude of prejudice and hostility towards the Indo-Fijians was summed up by James Michener in his *Return to Paradise* where he etched the following pen picture about them: 'It is almost impossible to like the Indians of Fiji. They are suspicious, vengeful, whining, unassimilated, provocative aliens in a land where they have lived for seventy years.'
- 22.13. As for the native Fijians, they lived separately in their own communities under Gordon's 'benevolent' dispensation. Like the whites, they too had begun to regard the Indians as unwelcome aliens with unfamiliar religions and strange cultural mores. The PIOs had not normally been permitted to enter their native townships. On the occasional instances when some Indians happened to go there, they had often received an unfriendly and hostile reception. It was rare for an Indian to marry an indigenous Fijian as both communities frowned upon miscegenation.
- 22.14. On the other hand, by the 1940s and 50s, the diligent and worldly wise Indians had acquired, with their interest in education, a new impetus for economic progress. Many of their children were being sent abroad to study in foreign colleges and universities. There was also a gradual urbanisation of the Indian settlers as they migrated to the new towns that were coming into existence. Many of them had moved from the plantations to occupy themselves in trade and commerce, which became almost an Indian monopoly. In the main streets of the growing towns, Gujarati names were prominently displayed on the shops. Some of the Indians drove the latest models of British and Japanese cars, even as the Fijians languished in subsistence agriculture, despite owning 83% of the land area of Fiji. The all-too obvious prosperity and higher standards of living of the Indians led to growing resentment by the indigenous people, who felt outclassed in what they regarded as their own country.

- 22.15. On more than one occasion, the Great Council of Chiefs had voiced the alarm of the Fijians at the growing number of the PIOs. Pio Manoa, a native Fijian, wrote in the 1940s that there were even some rumours that the Indians were going to be loaded into ships like cargo and forcibly repatriated as they would soon be outnumbering the Fijians. They were already dominating the economic life of the country, which was intolerable. The rumours turned out to be mere wishful thinking. But they were certainly indicative of the inter-racial relations that had already become part of the local scene by that time. Pio Manoa described these developments as ‘marking the end of innocence and the beginning of stereotype formation in the country’.
- 22.16. Meanwhile, as the Japanese forces came within striking distance of Fiji in the Pacific sector during World War II, the Indo-Fijians came under fire for their reluctance to enrol themselves in the armed forces. Out of a total of about 11,000 persons who had enlisted, 1070 were Europeans and only 264 were Indians, the rest being native Fijians. This had earned the Indian community considerable criticism. They were accused of being more interested in making money; and also of disloyalty to their adopted country. It has been suggested later by some of the PIOs that there may have been many reasons why they had held back. The community’s leaders had demanded the same scale of pay as the Europeans and, as this was summarily rejected, they did not want to submit to such discriminatory treatment. Another reason advanced by them was that, as Indian leaders in India had initially given a call to boycott the war effort, the Indo-Fijians had decided to do likewise. But reasons of this kind did not seem to cut much ice with the indigenous Fijians.
- 22.17. If the indenture system had been a facet of economic imperialism, the sustaining factor of colonialism in the Fijian islands was race. At the top of the pyramid were the white settlers in their privileged position. The indigenous Fijians occupied an intermediate position because of the paternalistic policy pursued from the time of Gordon’s governorship. The Indian settlers constituted the lowest rung. In fact, a subtle form of apartheid had become part of the local scene from the very beginning of the indenture system and throughout the colonial period. It is not surprising, therefore, that the colonial legacy of racism was continued after the country’s independence. If anything, it was further aggravated when alarm bells rang to announce that the PIO population had overtaken the native Fijians. When independence was granted to the archipelago, the departing British gave a farewell gift to the indigenous population which was very much in the spirit of Sir Arthur Gordon’s legacy of perpetuating the special status of the indigenous Fijians in the new political system.

## **The Contemporary Scene in Fiji**

- 22.18. Indo-Fijians have always worked for the peace and prosperity of Fiji and have made enormous contributions to the economy of Fiji in terms of its agriculture, trade and industry. Indo-Fijians have also contributed to the social, educational and cultural advancement of Fiji. The Legislative Council of colonial days had, however, ensured that the Indian members would not be able to form a government on their own strength. A similar pattern of weighted representation was

repeated in the constitution that was gifted to Fiji when it attained freedom – exactly 96 years to the day after cession, on 10 October 1970.

- 22.19. The PIOs successfully overcame this legacy by forming a multiracial government under the leadership of Timoci Bavadra, a non-racist Fijian. This was one of the factors which led to the launching of Sitiveni Rabuka's two military coups in May and November of 1987. Those coups heralded a period of violence and mayhem. PIOs, including many leading persons among them, migrated in their thousands to Pacific Rim countries like Australia and New Zealand, Canada and the United States. International sanctions and the country's growing economic difficulties compelled Rabuka to end his military intervention. A revised constitution was adopted in 1990. It sought to introduce a more balanced distribution of legislative seats than before. What followed after that is current history and may be summed up as follows:

The leader of the Labour Party won a landslide victory in the elections in May 1999 and Mahendra Pal Chaudhry became the first Prime Minister of Indian origin. On 19 May 2000, Chaudhry and his colleagues were taken hostage by George Speight, a failed businessman. The military under Commodore Frank Bainimarama finally intervened and hostages were released after 56 days. Giving a ruling on the petition filed by an Indian, the Fiji High Court ordered reinstatement of the Chaudhry Government. It stated that the Interim Government put in place by the military was unconstitutional. The Interim Government went in appeal and Chaudhry could not resume the office of the Prime Minister and the rule of the illegal interim administration continued. The Fiji Court of appeal dismissed the appeal of the interim administration against the ruling of the High Court Judge, Anthony Gates. Mahendra Chaudhry met acting President and advised him to dissolve the Parliament and order fresh elections. The Great Council of Chiefs had meanwhile reappointed Ratu Iloilo as President who formally dismissed Mahendra Chaudhry on March 14, 2000 and appointed Ratu Tevita Momoedonu in his place. On the advice of Momoedonu, Ratu Iloilo dissolved the Parliament. Following Momoedonu's resignation, he appointed Laisenia Qarase as caretaker Prime Minister till the elections. Fresh elections were held leading to hastily patched up majority for Qarase. He refused the Constitutional requirement of including Mahendra Chaudhry and other Opposition MPs in his Cabinet although they had obtained sufficient seats in the Legislature to be so appointed.

- 22.20. The future of the Indian Diaspora in Fiji appears to be rather bleak. It can only change if there is a change of heart towards it on the part of the indigenous Fijians. That does not, as of now, seem at all likely. Meanwhile, many Indo-Fijians are planning to migrate again from the land in which they or their forbears had settled down. This second migration is not likely to be back to India, the land of their ancestors, but to any developed country that would agree to accept them. It would, in all probability, be to one or other of the Pacific Rim countries, where many other Indo-Fijian PIOs have already settled down and started a new life of 'trans-national Indians'. This was the main ambition that was projected to the Committee when, during our visit to Sydney in July 2001, we met a group of PIOs who had already migrated to Australia after the Rabuka coups.

## **Demands and Expectations of the Diaspora**

22.21. It has not been possible for the Committee to make a detailed assessment of the demands and expectations from India of the Diaspora in Fiji. The political situation currently prevailing in that country, briefly touched upon in the previous section of this chapter, has been so complex and turbulent that the Committee was not able to visit that country. We were only able to interact with some Indo-Fijians who were visiting India, as well as with those who have migrated to countries like Australia and Canada. The demands and expectations articulated by various groups of Fijian expatriate communities are summarized below:-

- a) India should explore all possible avenues to bring international pressure to bear on the Fijian government, so that it gives up its racist and discriminatory policy towards the Indian Diaspora in Fiji.
- b) Several thousand young Indo-Fijians should be sponsored for migration to India.
- c) Facilities should be provided for such persons to pursue vocational studies that would enable them to go back and start a new life in Fiji, without being thwarted by the current system of only the indigenous Fijians owning all the land.
- d) The more talented Indo-Fijian youth should be assisted to pursue professional courses that would make them eligible for migration to a developed country. From there, they could sponsor their near and dear ones in Fiji to join them and thus escape from the problems currently encountered in Fiji
- e) India should assist the Indian community in Fiji to establish a university in the country. Such an institution would enable Indo-Fijians to get good quality education.
- f) A Cultural Centre should be set up in the Asia-Pacific Region to meet the cultural aspirations of the Indian communities in that region.
- g) Facilities should be provided to enable Indo-Fijians to learn Hindi.
- h) Religious books like the *Ramayana*, as well as some Indian musical instruments should be provided to Indian associations in Fiji.
- i) Indian associations and societies in Fiji should be provided with funds to enable them to organise seminars and other functions to project in the country a positive image of modern India.

In subsequent discussions, the Committee has learnt that the demands listed at (b), (c) & (d) have very little support among the Indo-Fijian communities. The PIOs living in Fiji as well as overwhelming majority of the Indo-Fijian communities abroad would like India to make all out efforts to help PIOs in Fiji achieve political, economic and social rights at par with indigenous Fijians.

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