

Fijian Studies

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When no one is left to tell the story,
would there be no history?

On History:
Fact,
Fiction,
&
Factions

Dialogue

The Fiji-Indian: A Complex Fate¹

Satendra Nandan

The fate of an Indian has never been a simple one: it is reflected in the various images that come to mind when we think of the Indian as Indian, East Indian, West Indian, Black Indian, British Indian, not to mention Red Indians and the Cowboys! My aim here is to attempt a self-definition of the Fiji-Indian or Indo-Fijian: that namelessness itself underscores the indefinable about him.

The fluctuating fortunes of the Fiji-Indian has a special immediacy because it has grown out of a fairly recent predicament of human history and contains within it seeds of new possibilities. It may, therefore, symbolise at least partially the very condition of man in the modern world for his life began with acts of uprooting from an ancient land, transportation across black waters, transplantation on a new, alien island, brutalisation in the barracks, exploitation within a system, and finally a sense of rootlessness and fragmentation in a landless, colonial situation. But, more importantly, he also survived much of this and continued to grow like grass after many a fire. In the process of regeneration he has discovered a new country and is moving towards a new identity, with a perception of a common destiny which he shares with others. This awareness is an important element in his emerging personality: what to many would have been a sofa set of grievances, the Fiji-Indian is using as a springboard of new challenges, new perspectives. Although we live on small islands, the nature of our experience is manifold and in some respects unique: it is perhaps in our uniqueness that some may find a universal relevance and significance; and we ourselves may see in our lives the shared condition of many others.

¹ A talk given at the NFP-National Convention in June 1978. First published in the *Fiji Sun*, 10 June 1978, and in the *Humanities Review*, University of Delhi, 1981.

Indianness - A Multicultural Tradition

Perhaps I should first attempt a brief definition of what is the essence of being an Indian. "Indianness" to me is a conception rich in diversity, reflecting the variousness of life, both physical and spiritual, and growing out of a civilisation that is continually being enriched by the currents of many cultures, old and new. The Indian sensibility - that capacity within us that enables us to react morally and imaginatively to human situations and see what is significant from what is trivial - that sensibility is conscious of its roots deriving sustenance from many cultural streams. The striking achievement of the Indian has been his ability to accept, absorb and integrate these into a vital way of life.

In short, he is a product of a multicultural tradition: a tree that is deeply rooted in its soil but opening its leaves, branches and new roots to wind, sun, and rain from every direction. It is all-inclusive, not exclusive. I hope to return to this idea of a multicultural tradition at the end and relate it to our image of being a Fiji-Indian. Here I would mention to you that the Indian as a narrow, parochial person is not the true reflection of his patrimony. It is indeed a picture painted on the blackboard of our mind by some journalists, politicians and preachers and sadly some of us began to see ourselves as others have painted us. Indeed often we have reinforced that portrait by our petulant behaviour and petty beliefs.

It may come as a surprise to many of us to know that long before Christianity civilised Europe, doubting Thomas was preaching Christ's message in Kerala. The vision of an Asoka and Akbar brought centuries and peoples together. The landscape of India is littered with ruins of many imperial Emperors but the glowing symbols that survive and inspire the people are temples, churches and mosques which reflect the cultural conscience of the whole nation. When the Americans were erecting log-cabins, the Indians were building the Taj Mahal. I mention these at random to indicate to you the multi-dimensional nature of the Indian heritage. But, more importantly, the essence of Indianness was a sense of decency, a sense of humanity, a commitment to human values, and a deep concern for others, especially those who were less fortunate.

There was also a delight in the life of both the senses and the spirit. The most daring metaphysical view of life grew out of the most mundane preoccupations of daily existence. An Indian carried about him some idea of the continuity of life and at the same time cultivated in himself the great virtue of detachment for he knew the fragility of life itself and understood that ultimately one lives in the hearts and minds of men and women who live on. His own personal lot was never of paramount impor-

tance: hence many legends of renunciation, sacrifice and self-effacement. In times of trials and tribulations those legends become necessary for a people's survival. The legends of Rama, Buddha, Christ, Mohammed help us to live and bring deeper illuminations into our hearts so that we may not regard our suffering and sacrifices as the greatest. In the lives of great souls we see the realities of the human condition and accept our own. It was not a quest for a narrow egotistical identity but a conquest of it so that one attains the larger identity: to lose oneself to gain a community, to lose one's community to gain a whole country, the quintessential idea contained in the Atman-Brahman concept. There was always in the Indian a spirit of inquiry and ceaseless search for solutions to problems. Max Muller, the great Oxford Professor of Indology, has summed it well:

If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life and has found solutions to some of them which well deserved the attention of those who have studied Plato and Kant - I should point to India. And if I were asked myself from what literature we here in Europe ... may draw that corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human, a life, not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life - again I should point to India.

I have quoted this to suggest to you that a genuine awareness of the Indian tradition can be used to shape a profoundly relevant multicultural society that we here are so keen to create. The image that we are a petty people, exhausting our energies in petty prejudices reminding others of the noisy mynah birds does less than justice to our people. It is true that other layers have often silted and stultified our growth. But the argument that the Indian lost his resourcefulness and resilience because he could not adapt himself to a new environment, because he was cut off from his native moorings and has been drifting ever since, is to me a limited interpretation. On the contrary, this very historical situation offers him possibilities denied to many others.

The Overseas Indian

The Indian overseas is not a new phenomenon. Indeed Indians have travelled, settled and helped create new countries and new civilizations for centuries: the Indian pilgrim-teacher brought enlightenment to many

peoples in many places. He was often a peacemaker and innovator who shared his knowledge and his skill to cultivate new lands and structure new societies. Even in this century the Indian freedom movement became the most potent and crucial democratic force which eventually spawned independence to several nations. The point I am stressing is that the Indian has often sided with the oppressed, initiated radical thinking, showed generosity of mind and material, and contributed enormously for the welfare of others. Certainly waves of invasion, feudalism, casteism, colonialism, communalism have affected quite damagingly the self-image of the Indian; but there is a living, positive core at the heart of the Indian tradition which transcends the tremors of history.

It is, therefore, a pity that we often cling with passionate intensity to many aspects of Indianness that have been rejected in India as deadwood. The tendency to bind our people in the rusted shackles of the past, and conjure up ghosts from some spiritual graveyard so that we can control them, should be deplored because that is not the essential, regenerative nature of the Indian civilization; that superficial view has led our people to follow rituals without meaning, politics of reaction rather than new direction, demagoguery without democracy, a harping on yesterday's issues by yesterday's men. The time has come for us to look at the present situation and mould a philosophy, an ideology that emerges out of a vision of our past, present and future within our contemporary world. But before I explore that let me briefly look at our immediate legacy - the legacy of the Indenture System.

The Indenture System

The Indentured Indian, from whom the majority of us have descended, has altered the contours of history in a dozen countries. The system itself, as you are no doubt aware, began soon after the abolition of slavery, at least on paper. Indeed when the idea was mooted for large scale indentured labour, Lord John Russell, Secretary for the Colonies, wrote in 1840:

I should be willing to adopt any measure to favour the transfer of labourers from British India to Guiana ... I am not prepared to encounter the responsibility of a measure which may lead to a dreadful loss of life on the one hand, or, on the other, to a new system of slavery.

Whatever gloss we may put now on that system, the ordinary peasants, many of whom had never left their landlocked villages, were duped

by arakathis, recruited, loaded on to trains, herded into depots, and finally shipped to destinations thousands of miles away. In the new land, the masters were often brutal, the natives total strangers, and the work back-breaking: sugar before it became the backbone of countries broke many a human back! One can imagine the experience that moulded the indentured psyche: it was not so much the physical journey - one eventually recovers from it whether it lasted 53 or 153 days - it was the passage from India that shaped the personality of thousands who carried the girmit-yoke. Whatever one may say of the material conditions of Indian villages, it was not totally deprived for each little, obscure hamlet had an enduring sense of community sustained by generations of living together, though sometimes in difficult circumstances not unlike his Fijian brethren. Above all, the Indian's affinity with the land was as mystical as anyone else's anywhere else in the world: he always had a sense of belongingness, and frequently a sense of self-sufficiency. Both were necessary for his self-respect. As a writer put it: There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich *sthala-purana*, or legendary history of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village - Rama might have rested under this pipal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself on one of his many pilgrimages, through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and the gods mingle with men.

In the Indenture system they were caught in an hierarchy of power which was designed to extract the maximum labour from its victims, no matter what the cost in human terms. For almost a century the system continued, the people were trapped like flies in a spider's web: indifferent rulers, the convict coolumbers, the unscrupulous sirdar, the fraudulent pundits, the cunning court clerks, the coolie money-lenders and acquisitive businessmen were waiting to cast their nets on them. All this naturally created in the Indian a certain enclosed outlook and self-interest became prominent. He had witnessed, often in silence, how expendable human beings were. It led to distrust because the journey, which had often begun in deception, was ending in disillusionment. Besides they had little opportunity to establish emotional ties with the land they tilled, on which many of their children and "jahajis" were being buried; they were deliberately kept from reaching out to the indigenous people because people in authority saw that as a threat to their monopoly of freedom and monopoly of power. The institutions of religion, administration, politics, education were mostly designed to serve a few and denigrate the many.

The indentured Indian initially saw this a degrading system in a derelict land.

The Fiji Indian

Fortunately, Fiji's history saved it from disaster. Here the system came almost fifty years after its inception; it came in a unique historical context: the impact of colonialism was never fully felt in all its barbarity in the South Pacific. The Aborigine had borne the brunt of it; the Maori had attempted to resist it. The European imagination was stirred by the images of the Noble Savage in the last garden of Eden. Fiji itself was ceded, not conquered. Its indigenous people were not decimated as had happened in many other colonial territories. Indeed by a happy irony the indentured Indian was uprooted specifically to prevent the Fijian way of life from disintegrating. It is interesting to speculate if this peasant labourer had not come to Fiji at a critical time, not only the Fijian way of life but many island communities in the South Pacific would have been disrupted and perhaps permanently dislocated. The children of Kanakas and coolies may really be closer than they realise. The planters needed labour, the colonial government wanted economic viability for political stability, and it is anyone's guess what they would have done to achieve this.

Thus the displacement of the Indian prevented the dispossession of the Fijian. This may be the lasting and most significant contribution of the peasants from India. Without this the Fijian might have lost much of his land, and more tragically his self-respect. When people blame the Indians for not integrating despite great obstacles placed on their path of integration, it may be more pertinent to ask for a few examples where the erstwhile colonial masters did not indulge in some form of genocide of the indigenous people, or create a sense of self-contempt by condemning their culture and way of life before converting them to join the chosen flock.

But there is no point in digging the graves of the past: each community has abundant skeletons rattling in its cupboard. Besides, no nation can build its future on the graves of yesterday. It is sufficient to say that Fiji generally escaped the tragedy that was not uncommon in the age. The Indian was the chief victim of exploitation, consequently the latter-day champions, racialists masquerading as nationalists, who nurse imagined racial grievance like a virtue and demand rewards from the innocent, will be hard put to support their arguments. Their prejudice against the descendants of these Indians is often due to the immigrant community's vir-

tues not vices.

The Fiji-Indian experience was further complicated by events in India. The first Indians arrived here in 1879; Gandhi was about 10 years old. The Indian movement for independence was slowly gaining momentum. At least some indentured labourers came with a twilight awareness of a new destiny for their country. India loomed large in their imagination and the tyranny of distance and the system only deepened that nostalgia. Here they were ruled by people whose main concern was products and profits not people. This further heightened their emotional ties with their native land and affected the Indian attitude for more than a generation. Many of their leaders began to fight the battles of India here: the indentured system was seen as a symbolic extension of the deeper evil of racial subjugation. Their freedom was allied to India's.

In Fiji itself the state of India has frequently been used by the media for tendentious propaganda, to frighten and humiliate. The mongrels kept barking at a tired elephant that had spent much of its energy fighting the imperial jackals. Presumably, now it is changing slowly and sensibly. For the Indian, the search for self-respect for his ancestral country was understandable; it helped the indentured labourer to survive with some sense of wholeness within a system and under a rule that for a long time denied him ordinary human dignity and a sense of a country. Thus, despite overwhelming odds he succeeded in imprinting indelibly his identity on the land, and in the process discovered a country: it was all the more extraordinary that he should have achieved this without depriving the indigenous people of their possession for in the dispossession of others there is little to be gained.

The Colonial Indian

Meanwhile the Indian himself was undergoing remarkable changes: cane became increasingly bitter, and sugar often sweet, white and deadly! It dominated every aspect of his existence and the CSR Company was the octopus exploring every weak spot of the community with considerable impunity. But perhaps the most lasting damage the Colonial Company and Administration did was to hasten the birth of the Colonial Indian: here we see the emergence of a group who were seeking not human dignity which meant recognising the dignity of the weakest amongst them of every community but the colonial dignity which was a pathetic mimicry of the values of the colonial masters. This segment of the society was reinforced by some new arrivals from India and elsewhere who immedi-

ately allied themselves with people with common interests, often against the interests of the common people. They saw themselves as the shining tip of the iceberg but what they really saw was the tip of an ice-cube in their bacardi and coke at cocktail parties! Whenever there was any cry for justice and fairplay, they conjured up the apocalyptic fate of a people dancing on the edges of a racial volcano unless we listened to them; we failed to see that they were really dancing on the rotten planks of a latrine that they themselves had erected.

The point I am making is that the majority of immigrant Fijians have common cause with indigenous Fijians: the same dreams, the same expectations: a piece of land, a house, a job, education, medical care and a life of simple security and bare necessities. It would be interesting to analyse why we who have so much in common have remained so far apart: one reason could be our desire to imitate the colonial life-style and create a disturbingly materialistic ethos. The poverty of the poor is painful enough but the vulgarity of the rich is unbearable and more pernicious: we have begun to value the size of the car, rather than the quality of the people who ride in it.

We began to value leaders who flattered our prejudices, rather than those who critically examined the quality of humanity we had hitherto displayed towards others; we honoured men in authority rather than their integrity. The Colonial began to see only one kind of society: his. That thinking led to the insidious argument that the only alternative to his kind of society was violence; that there were a thousand other alternatives open to us were seldom explored or mentioned. Because we were look down upon by one race, we found consolation in looking down upon others whose values were not inferior but simply different and often more humane.

Swami Vivekananda, the great social reformer, once said that the worst word the Indian coined in India was a *melicha*; here we used *jati* and *jungle*. We have continued to believe in the myth that we are an intelligent people and yet we know at every crucial twist and turn we have been outwitted because we try to be too clever by half. We lost sight of larger objectives, because we waste our energy on little issues. We gratuitously condemn the structures and systems necessary for the indigenous Fijian without even pausing to think that we have our own for thousands of years. It may be worth our while to scrutinize our imaginative understanding of the Fijian way of life before rushing into rash judgements about their belief systems. When outsiders were passing thoughtless and hasty judgements on the Indian society, one Indian wrote years ago:

The bond of kinship that prevails within a community not only pro-

fects it from wanton cruelty and injustice from inside but is the natural nerve channel through which we directly feel our race in its entirety. But the stranger from outside can easily be unjust, owing to the fact that he has not to pay for his conduct in his own feeling and be checked by that deeper sensibility which goes directly beyond the miscellany of facts into the heart of a living unity. And for the sake of his own benefit and others' safety he must bring with him his inner light of imagination, so that he may feel truth and not merely know facts.

Our perceptive colonial masters changed their tune according to circumstances and channelled the frustrations of one community against another who had so much in common, while we persisted with battles that had become irrelevant to us and continued to tilt at racial and political windmills, even when the winds had changed and there were no giants around.

My indentured grandfather used to tell me the fables of the Two Cats and a Monkey: one day the hungry cats found a piece of roti. They were so greedy, they could not share it and began quarrelling. They went to a monkey to ask for his judgement. The monkey obliged with a pair of scales: the revealing symbol of justice. He divided the roti into two and weighed; naturally one side weighed a bit more - like 49%-51% so common here; he took a large bite off the heavier portion. The other side became heavier, and he repeated his act. The cats sat staring, marvelling at the sense of fairplay of the monkey, until finally there was no roti left. The cats realised their stupidity only too late. This is an old fable and we today continue to play the colonial monkey game with every cat wanting to be a monkey.

The New Leadership

Admittedly the leadership of all communities have made mistakes. Those in power moved from one level of colonial thinking to another. Those out of power mistook their words for power, and their personal delusions as national needs. It was a difficult time and politics became the art of the possible. But with the new leadership and new kind of political relationships developing - our one great hope - the emphasis should now shift so that we may look at our political life as a 'science of possibilities' - that phrase implies rationality, objectivity, an absence of rash judgements, needlessly provocative remarks, a commitment to develop without fear or favour the rich and varied potential of all our people and an active awareness that a multitude of values make up our national identity. The

task will not be easy, nor will it be achieved in our lifetime but we must move towards it now - even the longest journey begins with the first step. Every creative, dynamic society should develop in its citizens, especially its leading citizens, the capacity for looking at problems - both personal and national - with the intellectual and moral rigour of a truly educated mind. Surely that element is not absent from the Pacific Way of life. It is sad that in our country some tend to look at every problem by putting on their racial glasses and see things either darkly or whitely. The tendency to take the easy way out of every difficult situation is not in the long-term interest of anyone. What is even more dangerous is that some of us want the most from our country without giving the nation our best.

To be Fiji-Indian is to be aware of this complexity of our existence. It has taken us almost a hundred years to become integral to the Fiji landscape. We have acquired some conception of what it is to be an islander. It is not easy for people whose ancestors lived on a sub-continent and whose way of life was shaped by great rivers and greater mountains to suddenly accept the nature of life on islands surrounded by a vast ocean. But a great deal still has to be done, especially by us, not only to understand but to participate understandingly in the life of our country. Those with a rare vision can see that living on islands we cannot forget that no man is an island; that if isolation is bad for the individual, it is infinitely worse for a community or a country; that those amongst us who have most, will be required to give most for the welfare of all; that increasingly the Fiji-Indian is becoming aware of his fate as a Pacific Islander; that we need to seek, establish and foster new relationships with our Pacific neighbours, both big and small.

We shall not create this larger consciousness amongst our people by lip-service, nor by running away from present realities. This is not the place for me to suggest workable alternatives, but I would like to stress that our present state is not an unalterable condition; that we can change, but like charity, change, too, begins at home and it does not end there: we need to take the initiative and critically look at our attitudes to many things, many peoples in these islands. The Fiji-Indian has that opportunity. This is not to deny that there are forces working against him, but we cannot let the pettiness and prejudices of others determine how we should behave. Can our new leadership give a larger vision to the people of Fiji? A vision that takes us beyond race: often in our pursuit of the facts of life, we forget that we are bound by certain truths of life as well. That is our most momentous challenge. Those who continue to ride the racial sharks will find it difficult to dismount. And then it may be too late to shed crocodile tears!

I began this conversation by emphasising that to be an Indian meant to be aware of a multi-cultural heritage. That is the core of Indianness, it is not confined to one race, one religion, unless by religion you mean God, by race Man. If that is true, then it should not be difficult for Fiji-Indians to adapt themselves to a truly Fiji Society: this country offers a unique opportunity for us to demonstrate the resilience and resources of a living tradition. The Fiji-Indian will ultimately belong to three of the finest traditions and out of these he will fashion a new, ever-expanding multicultural society. The indigenous tradition has a great deal to offer us: its sense of joy in living, its generosity and self-respect, its awareness that if for generations you have lived on islands people are more important than politics, and, above all, that human beings matter and the small can be beautiful. Intellectually, many of us belong to the western tradition by our education and training and live in a world increasingly influenced by western ways because of our geographical location. We grew up within the Indian tradition with its richness and variety, its sense of simplicity and humility, its acceptance of life in all its agonies and ecstasies. If only we could create a synthesis of these into one multicultural tradition how much richer our society would be. To be born in one, to be educated in another and to live in yet another, with a consciousness of the other two, is a tremendous possibility. It can be achieved only by people who are self-confident and possess a sense of history. The experience of a multicultural society will help them to adapt to new social environments into which our people will move because multiculturalism is becoming the predominant way of life all over the world. In the deeper illuminations of others' cultures our own will be focussed and sharpened so that we may have the courage to see ourselves as others see us: this is imperative for self-knowledge and self-understanding.

A New Society

This, of course, puts great and urgent responsibilities on all our shoulders because the battles have to be fought at so many levels and the bridges built over so many chasms, but more particularly on the new leadership. There is no doubt that your performance, so far, has been impressive both in dignity and a sense of responsibility. But a sense of responsibility is not all, it is to be reinforced by a sense of responsiveness towards others. That should be our national preoccupation: how and at what level should we respond to the anxieties of other communities. I am certainly least qualified to give advice but if I were to comment I would

suggest to you that you should be unequivocally committed to democratic means of achieving a new society. A good politician shows the courage of his convictions, a great statesman re-examines his convictions in the light of new knowledge and others' points of view. He also develops a sense of history and becomes aware of the mind of his country and age so that the solutions he espouses fit the people like their clothes.

Any leader who is conscious of how the past directs the present, and how the present is shaped by our vision of the future, is conscious of great difficulties and responsibilities. His greatness will be measured by how much of the future he can inject in the present, and how much of the past he can reject without destroying what is of value. But perhaps, above all, he is aware of the fate of a politician of a small country. He knows that his life will be inevitably structured by forces often from outside over which he has little control. Therefore, he would not give false hopes to his people nor would he delude himself: many a promising leader has ended up as a politician of promises! Let me quote to you the fate of a colonial politician: one who reaches the top and discovers the emptiness. I quote his soliloquy:

I know the return to my island and to my political life is impossible. The pace of colonial events is quick, the turnover of leaders rapid. I have been already forgotten; and I know that people who supplanted me are themselves about to be supplanted. My career is by no means unusual. It falls into a pattern. The career of the colonial politician is short and ends brutally. We lack order. Above all, we lack power, and we do not understand that we lack power. We mistake words and the acclamation of word for power; as soon as our bluff is called we are lost.

I have quoted this to remind you that such a fate is not unusual. That eventually you will be judged by your integrity, political will and the affection of your whole country: not of one section, not of one group. I think a leader should tell his people quite honestly that we are a small country, and we ourselves are frogs in a small pond; that there are many things we cannot do without the help of our neighbours; that increasingly our welfare lies in the welfare of the Region: that there is considerable goodwill abroad towards our small country and that we should not erode it with empty and arrogant statements. I think Marx somewhere wrote: Religion is the opium of the masses. I would like to warn you that: Revolution should not become the opium of the academic classes! We have a great deal already in our country on which we can build a worthy society; why do we need to borrow ideologies from outside, particularly at a time

when these political systems are being severely questioned by those who are groaning under them. I think sometimes these aspects of our existence need to be stated explicitly so that our people understand their strengths and limitations. Recently I travelled by a ship to Suva. As we approached Fiji, it occurred to me how much we are like people in a ship: some occupying the upper decks, some the lower but each one clinging to his belongings and sitting secure in his cabin. None aware of the storm or a reef ahead. Comfortable, complacent people suffer from a false sense of security. It is the duty of the leaders to occasionally tell the passengers of the ship's vulnerability.

But, because we belong to a small country, we need not necessarily be a petty people. This is where the new leadership must move towards creating a new image, a new faith and trust: where it will encourage people to think generously of their political opponents; where it will foster the spirit of dialogue and enquiry; where it will enable people to live their ordinary lives in an atmosphere of freedom and fearlessness; where it would remove the pus of racialism from the wounds of the past. These are challenges: and perhaps for these we will need to make significant changes in the political structure, in our educational system, in our economic life and social values, but, above all, in our personal attitudes towards others in our daily dealings because ultimately political maturity is ratified by all living. It makes me wonder why the Fiji-Indian who serves virtually every aspect of society here has not succeeded in building bridges between peoples: familiarity should have bred friendship, but it hasn't. It may need some serious self-examination on our part. It will not be enough to look back on the last 100 years and blame others because the next century is already knocking on the door. It is time we saw ourselves reflected in the glass of that door.

Without Fear or Fraud

One thing I do feel is that we cannot achieve anything if we approach it with fear. Every time someone speaks about Indians anywhere, half the people run into their holes, the other half pack their suitcases for the early-bird flight. No people can afford to do that: it's unworthy of a people and unfair to the others because it encourages them to be bullies. The Fiji-Indian is as much part of this seascape as anyone else: that is inalienable and non-negotiable. There are problems beyond that: problems of land, constitution, education, work and a host of others. This is not the occasion to discuss these but I do believe that none is insoluble: with

goodwill towards others and political wisdom in ourselves much can be achieved; the Queen is visiting Germany, the Japanese are building cars and buying uranium in Australia; surely the history of our people living together is far more favourable? If they can work together to find answers to mutual problems after two world wars, why can't we?

I think if the present leadership can come up with imaginative ideas and initiatives, the new generation of Fijians - both indigenous and immigrant - can play a dynamic role in their country's future. Unlike many countries, Fiji did not go through nationalism but we can attempt to create an abiding sense of nationism - a better ideal. It is true that unity is strength but unity based on mere fact of race is hardly worth having. I hope the new leadership would build unity on issues, not on personal or racial criteria. These issues must cut right across the racial barriers because we know that not all people in one racial group are poor, nor all poor people belong to one race. The poor, both rural and urban, must become our most urgent concern. One of the dangers of colonial thinking is that we change the shape and size of the bottles, but the wine remains the same, or to put it another way, we get rid of one kind of shirt and substitute it with the safari variety with additional pockets for our own marbles; the marble mentality is no longer enough: by that I mean the psychology of the bully who in school days always wanted to snatch your marbles because he had either lost his own or wanted to hoard more than others!

Some years ago, I read about a journey made by a descendant of an indentured Indian: this young man travelled through several small countries of his region and wrote:

For seven months I had been travelling through territories, which unimportant except to themselves, were exhausting their energies in petty power squabbles and maintaining of the petty prejudices of petty societies. I had seen how deep ... were the prejudices of race; how often these prejudices were rooted in self-contempt; and how much important action they prompted. Everyone spoke of nation and nationalism but no one was willing to surrender the privileges or even the separateness of his group. Nowhere was there any binding philosophy: they were only competing sectional interests. With an absence of a feeling of community, there was an absence of pride, and there was even cynicism.

New Challenges, New Hope

I hope when our children revisit our shores, they will see us differently, depending on how we see ourselves now. I hope in my talk with you I have given you some indication of a sense of true pride, and a true community: that you as leaders will seek a common name for all our people because they belong to one nation and share, in the final analysis, a common condition. It will not be easy, but as I said at the outset, the fate of an Indian anywhere has never been easy. Nevertheless, if you look at the emergence of the Fiji-Indian, every obstacle he has converted into an opportunity, every difficulty into a challenge. Perhaps the greatest challenge is facing us now: the challenge of creating a concept of one country, one people. It, to me, remains the prime responsibility of the present leadership: you will have to evolve an ideology from within the confines of this country. Borrowed ideas and solutions will no longer suffice. And you will need to do it without compromising any one's sense of human dignity or self-respect, least of all your own. I feel if you can come up with a political platform that was both rational and ethical, politically fair and socially just, you will succeed in attracting a large majority of the people of Fiji who would like to associate themselves with a vision that is larger than themselves because they know that Fiji itself is larger than all its communities put together. The vision must emerge out of our recognition of the present realities and be informed by an awareness of future possibilities. We do not need leaders of slogans, but men and women of principles to lead us. And lead you must. This is your challenge. And I hope you will continue to keep your head when all around you are losing theirs and blaming it on to you.

I am not a politician but a bit of a poet. So let me conclude by retelling a small parable:

Birbal, a young man, whose grandparents had settled in a new country where he was born, always dreamt of some treasure hidden on the banks of a holy river in his grandfather's homeland. One day, when he had collected enough money, he travelled to his grandfather's land. And went straight to the bank of the holy river where he had dreamt the treasure was hidden under a bridge. The bridge was guarded by a sentry who was really quite kind despite his ferocious moustache. The sentry asked him what he wanted and Birbal was so scared that he told the truth. The sentry laughed. "Really" he said, "What a pity you believe in dreams! If I believed in dreams I would be flying to a little island in the South Pacific digging great treasure under the fireplace of one Birbal. His grandmother

has left him some truly precious jewels but the foolish fellow doesn't know." Birbal was naturally aghast and, without revealing his identity, he caught the next plane home and landed at Nandi Airport, hired a tourist taxi and reached home. He rushed to the kitchen and began digging: lo and behold, there was indeed a bucket full of jewels under his own fireplace!

The moral of the fable is not that we start digging our neighbour's fireplace but that the real treasure is never far away. That the answers to our problems are around us, if only we will search for them; if only we will sit and share our anxieties and strengths. If we cannot see our destiny as one entwined with the life of others then we shall disappear like dinosaurs who could not adjust themselves to the changing conditions. This does not mean that others do not have to change, they must and will if we have the courage and capacity to initiate those changes in ourselves.

Let me end by quoting a little poem aptly called "The Small Country":

*Did I confuse the categories?
Was I blind?
Was I afraid of hubris
in identifying this land
With the Kingdom? Those stories
about the far journeys, when it was here
at my door; the object of my
contempt that became the toad
with the jewel in its head!*

...

*The dinosaurs have gone their way
into the dark. The time-span of
their human counterparts is
shortened. Everything on this
shrinking planet favours the survival
of the small people, whose horizons
are large only because they are content
to look at them from their own hills.*

*I grow old,
bending to enter the promised land
that was here all the time,
happy to eat the bread that was baked
in the poets' oven, breaking my speech
from the perennial tree
of my people and holding it in my blind hand.*

Many complexes, many complexities of the Fiji-Indian will dissolve into the blue Pacific when he can say unselfconsciously: these are our people, this sea of islands make up our country. Only then will the complex fate become a creative, challenging future and our, multicultural islands will stand as beacons in a world of encircling gloom. We have more than ourselves to live and work for.

Author

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