

## Rise and Fall of Hari Haraya Prasad, Politician: One-Man-One-Vote / Two-Votes

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Our politician was born Hari Haraya Prasad. He was a tall, lean man with the face of a mule. He dropped out of school after year five, having tired of the constant taunts he had to endure from his peers, teachers and, on occasions, the principal, aimed principally at his mule face. His father, Thakur Dwarka Prasad, at the gentle persuasion of his wife, Dhanmati, reluctantly accepted his decision to drop out of school and even tolerated his days of inactivity, but when his son added to his woes (impending expiry of the land lease, the deliberate setting of fires in his cane field and a minor stroke) by getting drunk on methylated spirit in the middle of the day and stealing chickens from the neighbour's coop in the middle of the night, he decided to immediately send him packing. Here again it was the intervention of Dhanmati that saw Haraya remain under his father's rickety roof but with the severe admonition that he immediately mend his ways, starting with finding employment to contribute to the running of the household. And so Haraya did a bit of this and a bit of that – weeding the neighbour's gardens, cutting the para grass on the edges of the sugarcane fields, removing cow dung from the cow pen, grazing goats in the hills for a goat farmer – in order to earn his keep but he could never really settle on any one activity for any length of time. His father's half-brother, Kallu Prasad the ironmonger (Thakur Dwarka Prasad's father, Thakur Birbal Prasad was something of a Cassanova, well-known for his many trysts with young belles across the district and Kallu was the product of his association with the sixteen year old daughter of one Rangamutthu, a farmhand from Dakuwaku), took him in as an apprentice only to have Haraya give up after a few days of half-hearted slogging. For Haraya, even the simplest task like taking the cattle for a drink in the nearby stream was a mountainous undertaking.

And so he continued doing a bit of this and a bit of that well into his late thirties until one day, Ghanpathi Baba, the settlement's premier healer and seer, summoned him to his yellow corrugated-iron lean-to beside the muddy creek that ran through Dus Numbar, splitting the settlement into two even halves, and described to him in a state of great agitation, a dream he had had the previous night in which he saw Haraya in parliament, persuading the scallywag to act on it by standing as a candidate in the approaching general elections, hence setting him off on one of those quixotic journeys in the annals of Dus Numbar history. Mysterious are the imagination of seers and healers. Ghanpathi Baba liked the name Hari Haraya. It had a mystical ring to it. How in heaven did such a sublime name come to be attached to this larrikin? Baba's godly namesake carried the head of an elephant; this one the visage of a khachad, mule. He was special.

Two days after Ghanpathi Baba's vision, and one day after its revelation to Haraya, the man of the hour emerged from his father's house at five in the morning – this fact itself amazed a lot of people for he was not known to emerge from anywhere until around ten in the weekdays and well after midday on the weekends – after a night of grog-induced sleeplessness during which he grappled with the idea of someday being in parliament with esteemed personages like Siddiq Koya and A. D Patel. He rounded up a bunch of fellow-louts from the settlement on the dodderly veranda of his father's wooden house, announced to them, over a basin of grog, his intention of standing as an independent candidate in the upcoming general elections.

'You gonna stand for Labour?' Bhong Nath, the sardar's badmash son, asked cheekily.

After receiving a swift blow to the cranium, avoiding baseline fracture, the unlettered chap who had asked the question got a brief lesson on the meaning of 'independent' from the same fellow who had delivered the swift blow. Meanwhile news of Haraya's momentous announcement spread through town like a deliberately lit cane fire. Some laughed at the prospect of a *laymaar* (good-for-nothing) like Haraya ever doing anything sensible in life, while others berated the kingmaker who had misguided the 'poor fellow' by giving him such dangerous advice. Then there was Ratu Kaliappan, carrier driver and the staunchest Labour Party supporter (self-proclaimed) in the settlement, who upon hearing of Haraya's decision from his wife Kala Wati, dropped everything – in this case a bottle of coconut oil and the very source of the news, his wife Kala Wati, who he was in the process of mounting on the kitchen table – and gathering a small band of fellow Labour Party fanatics, promptly visited Haraya who

was in the midst of addressing an assemblage of his fellow chamchas on the wobbly veranda of his father's house and tried to make him reconsider his calamitous decision. But Haraya was intimidated neither by the large band of goons standing behind Ratu Kaliappan nor by the quivering rage in his voice which reverberated in the courtyard, and stood his ground and after collecting the registration fee from supporters and sympathisers, registered as a candidate at the elections office and then began in the next few weeks the fateful campaign, which if successful, would place him at the heart of political power in the land – the Parliament.

During the many arduous months of campaigning, Haraya underwent innumerable personal reforms, which people around him noticed and which they pointed out to each other with an admixture of shock and admiration. One significant transformation the inhabitants of Dus Numbar and other settlements in the vicinity noticed – this was apart from the equally significant facts that he now took to waking up during the very early hours of the morning, and that his days were no longer spirited away in inactivity – was that he had suddenly become an authority on everything from the Cold War to genetic engineering and from eighteenth century English history to the workings of the United Nation's Security Council. As he stood campaigning under the large tamarind tree near the entrance to the settlement or addressing his fellow chamchas on the quivering veranda of his father's house, Haraya's monologue frequently strayed from the campaign issues and lingered on distant and inconsequential concerns such as the condition of the coal miners in eighteenth century England, the number and types of military aircraft possessed by the United States and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War (which ones could deliver the most destruction) and finally whether cloning humans was morally acceptable, before returning to more pertinent issues such as the need to fix potholes on roads and piped water supply. Over the course of the campaign, he had developed an uncanny knack for managing to persuade his listeners that he was a leader of wide knowledge, deep sympathy and universal vision.

During his many digressions into useless esoteric matters he frequently told those rounded up that he possessed thick tomes – here he indicated the thickness of these supposed texts with his thumb and index finger – on every conceivable subject. When someone, obviously a mischief-maker planted by the Fiji Labour Party bent on derailing his campaign, dared ask him if he could borrow one of these tomes, Haraya would reply, 'Paglai giya ka, bhaiya. Book long berry ikspensive hai' (Have you gone mad, brother? The books are very expensive). Inciden-

tally Haraya developed his own patois that of considerable scholarly interest to the author who hopes to publish the gibberish discourses separately at a later date, perhaps posthumously. Naturally his followers forgave this impertinence on the part of the Labour Party snoop with only a slight murmur. Another profound change the people noticed in him was that he now assumed a more, let's say, philosophical tone – he began to talk in a slow (almost mannered) and deliberate style, the same annoying way in which his favourite Bollywood actor Manoj Kumar does when he is trying to mimic another mannered player, the thespian Dilip Kumar. Haraya was no avid picture-goer, but he had a quiet guru, a matinee-goer, who was well-versed in mannerisms of stars and starlets. During his addresses to his chamchas, he frequently assumed the posture of a great thinker pondering over a deep mystery of life – whenever he felt he had a grip on his audience Haraya would cup his chin with the palm of his right hand, all fingers folded except the index finger, which he would tap against his temple to the beat of his own words. Finally, he also began taking dips three times a day in the sugar-mill polluted Qawa River, a change from his usual once a week dip, mostly to clarify his inner thoughts as it wasn't possible to do anything for his outer physical self in the murky water. This transformation, however, wasn't altogether enthusiastically welcomed by the people of the settlement who now had to endure the added stench of the polluted Qawa River emanating from his already reeking corporeal being.

But the strangest thing about the whole 'Haraya bacchanal' (that fell on this unfortunate author to inscribe) was how he was able to infect half the people of the settlement with his vision of a new society. This became a great cause for concern not only for the Fiji Labour Party candidate for the constituency who saw the *pagla launda* (silly lout) as a crazy threat, but also for the thinking man/woman worried about the state of the world. Traditionally, the area had been a Labour Party stronghold but Haraya, it seemed, had effortlessly cut a devastating schism into the Labour stronghold.

One afternoon, deep into his surging campaign, and after someone – no doubt another mischief-maker planted by the Fiji Labour Party to derail his campaign – questioned him on his election manifesto ('show us your party manifest, launda'), the realization dawned on him that he needed a manifesto, Haraya sat down on the rocking veranda of his father's wooden house and began crafting the manifesto of his lifetime on a long piece of curry-stained lunch wrapper, with the invaluable input of the ragtag band of bums who followed him everywhere for name and fame, and naturally to be photographed with him. He called his party

People's Independent Party. He then organized several meetings in Dus Numbar and other Indo-Fijian settlements close by where he told the people about the lofty ideals his party stood for and what he would attain if he were voted into the parliament. The first thing he promised the people was that he would 'gravel the tar seal roads' (this popular plea worked for another like-minded politician in another constituency. So his ideas weren't that original after all).

A few weeks before the general elections he collected another ragtag band of idlers from the neighbouring settlement and together with his usual ragtag band of devotees from Dus Numbar staged a march through the streets of slumbering Labasa Town. The placards that the group carried bore sensible inscriptions such as 'we want true democracy'; 'higher wages for all', 'don't pollute Qawa River', the more cryptic 'gravel the tar seal roads and be done with it' and 'one-man-one-vote. Till this day this author hasn't been able to track the thinker behind these slogans. This author was also a presence on the day Haraya and his band of followers took to the streets of Labasa Town and can say with authority that our politician certainly managed to create a certain amount of distraction. The town folks may be a little naive in political matters but they do have a sense of the absurd. In Labour Party's estimation, Haraya's popularity was soaring so cataclysmically that the party caucus in Suva called an emergency meeting to decide on how to deal with this menace. A think tank was hurriedly formed and three wise men despatched to Labasa to pay respect to Haraya's father, once a diehard Fiji Labour Party stalwart, and plead with him to counsel his renegade son.

'*Bosadi wala mangle Hindustani vote split kare ka?*' (Does the stupid bugger want to split the Indian vote?), the irate Fiji Labour Party candidate for that area demanded to know from Haraya's father. This did not go well with Haraya's father, a sober gentleman who was against abuse and swearing. Nonetheless Thakur Dwarka Prasad promised to throw his obdurate offspring out of his domicile if he did not withdraw his candidacy immediately; however once again it was the timely intervention of Dhanmati, who despite what anyone said about her son, considered him the pulse-beat of her universe, which stopped her husband from executing his threat. The Labour wise men once again went to Haraya to plead sense into him saying that his presence would split the Indian vote and allow a candidate backed by one of the iTaukei political parties to sneak through. Haraya, now emboldened by the racket he was causing, and by the growing number of admirers in the media, and by the loyalty of the shabby band of bums that followed him everywhere he went, stood his

ground. It was now certain Haraya would give the Fiji Labour Party candidate 'a good run for the money'.

When the results of the elections were announced, alas, Haraya received a single vote, probably his own, but he vehemently denied voting for himself – he called the allegation that he voted for himself a 'media conspiracy'. Of course this is some sort of a landmark in the annals of democratic voting, and ought to have been properly archived. When people comforted him for his loss he promptly rounded up an audience and surprised everyone by declaring that he would stand in the next general elections uttering the optimistic mantra that the 'journey to parliament begins with one-man-one-vote'. He stood in the next general election and received the same single vote, again probably his own. This time he was quite noticeably distraught and even undertook self-exile from the settlement. But unlike Lord Rama, he ended his exile prematurely, returning a few months later, leaner and hungrier for victory. He sought and rounded up the squalid band of bums that, on previous occasions had followed him everywhere and who were ready to continue their traditional role, and announced his candidacy for the next general election. This time he shocked everyone by receiving two votes. To this day as to the identity of 'the second voter' - the words of the settlement's school teacher Rambo (short for Ramboras Samadri) inspired, no doubt, by 'the second shooter' in the Kennedy assassination - no one in Dus Numbar seems to know or is even willing to discuss with outsiders. But Haraya couldn't care less about matters as trivial as the source of the second vote. He was absolutely ecstatic, and even contemplated postponing his retirement saying '*acha nachaya Labour ke*' (I really made the Labour Party prance). That he did, and not the Labour Party alone.

But he did retire. In his retirement, he continued to follow assiduously the political developments in the country. He would gather a bunch of new and old faithful everyday on the much improved veranda of his father's house and, around a plastic basin of grog, discuss the political misfortunes in the country. He would curse all the politicians of the country and say to those gathered: '*Agar hum retha paalimnt me, tub tum tamasa dekhta bhaiya*' (If I were there in parliament, then you would have seen the carnival brother). The men listened to him like wayward children listening to a parent, carefully nodding in agreement with all he said, the chosen ones promptly dealing with anyone who tried to cut in with a swift blow to the cranium, avoiding baseline fracture and with the remark '*dekta nai badkuwa long netaji baat kare hai?*' (Can't you see an esteemed person is talking?). He told the late night kava addicts that he was happy because he had lived a full and eventful life but that his one great

sorrow and fear was he hadn't yet chosen a successor to take over the party. However at the end of each nightly session he said, rather mysteriously, that he had been eyeing someone and would announce his candidate when the time was right. Since that day this author avoided the grog sessions in case Haraya's eyes strayed on the obvious direction.

One day, during one of the nightly grog sessions on the veranda of his father's house, Haraya, to every one's surprise, announced that he was going to Suva to see the White House but would return soon to announce his successor. The next day he packed his little tin suitcase and left for Suva on the local ferry. Some of his tattered band of faithfuls made it to the jetty to bid farewell their leader, emotions clearly welling inside them and eventually finding an outlet in an explosion of tears, as they stood waving good bye to the man who had led them through the vicissitudes of three general elections; others, who could not join the farewell party were happy in the knowledge that one day soon he would return to announce a successor who would usher in a new era in the fight against the perpetual enemy, the Fiji Labour Party, and struggle for one-man-one-vote in the country. But Haraya was never seen in Dus Numbar or Vanua Levu again.

Those who are intrigued by this chronicle and want to know what happened to this one-man-one-vote/two-votes leader, the author ought to report he recently encountered him, accidentally, and against his firm intentions, on the streets of Suva City hawking razor blades and pain killers (the tablets looked exactly like Panadol, except they had no inscription cut into the surface, turned powdery when handled and tasted like something from Haraya's favourite Qawa River sludge). But no one escapes his gaze. He immediately recognised his chronicler and dragging him into an alleyway, began reminiscing about old times. It had to be asked whether the recluse still took interest in the political destiny of the country to which he scoffed and grinned mulishly: '*Huh. Oo time sab humaar baat sun leta to aaj Fiji mein aise sub nai hota*' (had anyone listened to me that time, all these things would not have happened in Fiji).

After all the misfortunes in the land how could anyone argue with that assertion?