

Children of Indus: Chaudhry Restoring Dignity to Girmitiya Descendants and Challenging Race Politics

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Introduction

The Fiji Labour Party (FLP) was formed in 1985 to promote social democracy in a Pacific island nation preoccupied and obsessed with ethnic politics since independence from Great Britain in 1970. Following independence, the chief-led Alliance Party, largely with the assistance of colonial authorities, established its grip on political power, which was challenged by indigenous Fijian nationalist Sekeasi Butadroka, causing an electoral upset in the April 1977 general elections allowing the Indo-Fijian National Federation Party (NFP), to win government. Sitiveni Rabuka, then an upcoming senior officer in the Fiji Military Forces contemplated overthrowing the elected government if the NFP took office and suggested reinstalling the chiefs but the Governor General of Fiji Ratu Sir George Cakobau fulfilled Rabuka's wishes to some extent and intervened to re-establish the political hegemony of the chiefs by appointing Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara as interim Prime Minister to lead a minority government. The political setup of Fiji after independence was three-way collaboration between indigenous Fijian chiefs, Indo-Fijians, and Europeans. However, the three-legged approach of the Alliance Party chiefs was seen as 'tokenism' by the Indo-Fijian population and in particular by Mahendra Chaudhry who was the secretary of the Fiji Public Service Association (FPSA) and the National Farmers Union (NFU), two large union bodies in post-independence Fiji. Chaudhry was an avid champion of workers and farmer rights and was instrumental in highlighting the political and economic exploitation of the Alliance Party. He was a strong critic of race politics that defined Fijian political face. He established the National Farmers Union in the early 1980s to counter the political influ-

ences of the NFP in the sugar sector. Chaudhry attempted to break the cycle of debt for Indo-Fijian sugar cane farmers and supported the rights of every day Fijian workers so that they could get reasonable wages. He proposed mechanisms to fight against the economic exploitation of workers by local businesses and overseas companies allied to the Fijian Alliance government.

The rise of Chaudhry as a political force in Fiji is documented in the book, *Children of the Indus*, written and published by the NFU in 2004.

The foreword provides the motivations for the book: 'It aims to provide the average reader with an outline history of our people, with particular focus on the struggles of the cane farming community to secure their future and that of their children in the land of their adoption'. For the NFU as the author of *Children of Indus*, the present day struggles of Indians in Fiji, particularly the cane farming community, is one which is led by the NFU and its leader Mahendra Chaudhry. The book is about this journey, of thought processes and activities, of Mahendra Chaudhry. In other words, the book is about the making of Mahendra Chaudhry as the champion of the rights of the descendants of girmitiyas.

Contextualising Mahendra Chaudhry in Indo-Fijian History

Chaudhry's vision was to restore Indo-Fijian dignity that was harmed by the colonial government, Alliance Party and the two racist military coups (1987, 2000). The colonial government saw Indo-Fijians as economic exploitable units, destined to serve the colonial masters in clearing land and assisting in the sugar plantation enterprise of the Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR). Indigenous land was made readily available for commercial sugar cane farming because indigenous Fijian chiefs supported the economic vision of their colonial allies. The revenues from the sugar industry were for the Empire and the Commonwealth. Proceeds of subsidised cane payments were appropriated by the CSR while the Indo-Fijian labourers continued to languish at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder (pp. 55-56).

Chaudhry knew his history and in particular how dependent development led to the exploitation of both workers and farmers. Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian public servants were paid less than their European counterparts because of inherent racist Anglo-Celtic white system and attempts by Indo-Fijian cane farmers for a decent cane payment were subjected to various forms of political sanctions (Kelly, 1988: 404). Indo-Fijian leaders, mostly from the Indian subcontinent, started in the 1930s

(Kelly 1991) their own campaign to organise Indo-Fijian farmers. The Fiji Kisan Sangh was the first such organisation. Led by Ayodhya Prasad and B.D. Lachman, it secretly organised a powerful farmer's union. Other Indo-Fijian leaders, A.D. Patel and Swami Rudranand, however, motivated by their own political agendas, formed the rival Maha Sangh and led the 1941 cane strike, which was considered 'unpatriotic' by many indigenous Fijians and the colonial government (pp. 63-75). Following the strike, the Kisan Sangh was considerably weakened and lost the support of the majority of Indo-Fijian cane farmers (p. 75).

Chaudhry saw the divisions of past Indo-Fijian leadership as a testament of endemic Indo-Fijian political failures. He sought to provide a different more robust leadership, premised on equality and restoration of dignity to the Indo-Fijian community and to all workers in Fiji. There were lessons to be learnt from the past and in particular from Maha Sangh's strategies to undermine Kisan Sangh and the NFP's push for independence in the 1960s and its role in opposition from 1970 to 1987 (pp.129-134). This played a significant role in shaping Chaudhry's political views. By the early 1980s, Chaudhry was disenchanted with both NFP leaders, Siddiq Koya and Jai Ram Reddy, and went on to form the NFU to break NFP domination of the sugar belt. Chaudhry who was also the leader of the powerful Fiji Public Service Association also championed workers' rights, in particular the rights of public servants. Following a series of austerity measures by the Alliance in 1984, the trade union movement banded together to launch a new multiracial political party.

The Rise of the Fiji Labour Party

On 6 July 1985, the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) was launched 'at an inaugural meeting held at the Fijian Teachers Association hall in Knollys Street in Suva. Apart from unionists, civil servants and workers in general, it attracted support from a wide circle of left-leaning academics at the University of the South Pacific' (p. 138). Led by charismatic indigenous Fijian doctor and President of the party, Dr. Timoci Bavadra, the party struck a chord with many urban workers and posed a serious challenge to the Alliance Party and the NFP. According to the NFU:

The new Labour Party challenged the existing political status quo. With considerable prescience, both Ratu Mara's Alliance government and the NFP saw it as a threat. Its socialist manifesto, promising wide reaching social reforms, a clean and open government found ready acceptance among the masses, cutting

across the traditional race-oriented power base of the two major political parties (p. 38).

Behind the scenes, Mahendra Chaudhry continued to exert influence over the party as a trade unionist. Chaudhry, from the Western Viti Levu province of Ba, aimed to be a champion of Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian worker rights. According to him, these rights could only be established by political and economic equality, enshrined in an acceptable constitution. Some of his critics saw Chaudhry as a left-leaning socialist, influenced by ideology of organised labour and nationalisation of strategic assets. The Alliance Party attempted to undermine him by restricting his union involvement. The 'anti-Chaudhry initiatives' of the Alliance Party failed when FLP candidate, Bob Kumar, won the Suva City Council elections in 1985. The FLP and its NFP coalition partners ousted the Alliance Party from power in the 1987 general elections. Key portfolios in the 1987 coalition government went to Harish Sharma as Deputy Prime Minister, Jai Ram Reddy, brought in through the Senate was appointed Attorney General, and Mahendra Chaudhry, Finance Minister. Bavadra kept for himself the Public Service and Fijian Affairs portfolios, and Lands went to Mosese Volavola, Joeli Kalou was Labour Minister, Krishna Datt, Foreign Affairs Minister and Tupeni Baba, Minister for Education (p. 141). Immediately after, a group from the Alliance Party formed the infamous Taukei Movement to undermine the multiracial coalition government. Led by mainly unsuccessful Alliance Party stalwarts, the Taukei Movement held noisy demonstrations in Suva, calling for the restoration of indigenous Fijian rights (p.143). The coalition believed that the Taukei Movement demonstrations were isolated incidents but Sitiveni Rabuka had other plans. On 14 May 1987, Rabuka deposed the government in Fiji's first bloodless coup. In this, he has the support of a faction from the Methodist Church, members of the Alliance Party, the Great Council of Chiefs, indigenous nationalists in the state bureaucracy and the Taukei Movement.

The May 14 coup had devastating economic and social consequences. Backlash 'came from Australian and New Zealand trade unions and the cane farmers' (p. 150). Chaudhry and the NFU were instrumental in organising sugar cane harvest boycott in June 1987. Indo-Fijians, concerned about their future, fled the island state in large numbers as 'Australia, New Zealand and Canada initially opened their doors to these refugees' (p. 151). By September 1987, there were signs of hope as the Governor General attempted to bring together both the Alliance Party and the coalition in a government of national unity. Meanwhile, coup leader

Rabuka interpreted the talks between the two rival parties as an affront to his aspirations. On 25 September 1987, Rabuka executed a second coup and 'at midnight of 9 October, to coincide with the anniversary of Fiji's Cession and independence the next day, Rabuka announced the abrogation of the 1970 Constitution, cut off all links with the British Crown and declared Fiji a republic. He assumed executive authority of Fiji, dismissing the Governor General' (p. 153). Immediately afterwards, Rabuka enacted the *Fundamental Freedoms Decree*, suspending all rights to free press and association. Chaudhry and his party members were under military surveillance and anti-coup initiatives were disrupted. Many FLP supporters and stalwarts were detained and harassed. Pressure from trade unions led Rabuka to hand power to Ratu Mara and Ratu Penaia in December 1987 but the attacks on the FLP, the unions and the farmers continued.

In February 1989, Chaudhry became the symbol of cane farmers' struggle when he took centre stage in negotiating the new Sugar Masters Award. After a series of successful legal wins, Mahendra Chaudhry organised large rallies in support of fair outcomes for the farmers and in 1990 organised a cane harvest boycott that brought the interim government to its knees. Nevertheless, 'the regime was determined not to let NFU hold sway over cane farmers to such devastating effect ever again. It issued a series of repressive decrees on 29 May 1991 to clamp down on union activities in the future and to clip the wings of Chaudhry but the draconian anti-union decrees led to another NFU threat to boycott cane harvest for the 1991 season' (p.168). Chaudhry remained undeterred and his militancy in the cane belt of Fiji was causing problems for the interim government, which was relying on sugar proceeds to re-build the economy shattered by the Rabuka coups in 1987. The strategy adopted by the interim government was to create divisions within the union movement and to remove Chaudhry from the position of general secretary of the Fiji Trades Union Congress. Their intent was realised when he was removed by 'a James Raman-Diwan Shankar-Attar Singh clique, who were also members of the rival National Federation Party. The challenge to Chaudhry came at a time when he was fighting the general elections in the West and was no doubt part of an NFP political gimmick to engage him on all fronts. Not surprisingly, after his removal, no decisive action was taken to remove the Labour Reforms' (p. 170).

Chaudhry doubled his efforts and led campaigns against the 1990 Constitution that was promulgated by the 1987 coup leaders to cement indigenous Fijian political hegemony. Chaudhry remained steadfast in his position not to contest the 1992 elections under the racist 1990 Constitu-

tion but FLP's coalition partner, the NFP, did not agree with boycotting the elections. As a result of Chaudhry's decision, indigenous Fijians who supported Chaudhry went on to form the New Fiji Labour Party in February 1992. Despite these setbacks, Chaudhry decided to participate in the 1992 elections; his party won 13 seats with NFP winning 14 (p. 172). Post 1992 election saw Indo-Fijians divided along the Gujarati businesses and South Indian community, led by the NFP and the cane farmers and workers represented by the FLP. Moreover, Chaudhry gave his support to Rabuka on condition that he review the 1990 constitution, remove 12 per cent Value Added Tax and end restrictive labour decrees. However, Rabuka was in no mood to keep his promise and in June 1993 the FLP staged a lightening walkout in protest of Rabuka's broken promises. According to the NFU, the 'walkout also signaled much closer relations between Reddy and Rabuka, prompting observers to jeer that Reddy had not lost much time in jumping into bed with Rabuka as soon as Labour had left (p. 175). In fact, Rabuka was facing an increasingly fractious government with Rabuka's SVT members voting against the 1993 Budget and defeating the government in the process. Former SVT members led by Josevata Kamikamica, formed the Fijian Association Party (FAP). Chaudhry saw this as an opportunity to work with a party concerned with cost of living pressures and started discussions with FAP to form a united front on 'bread and butter' issues. Besides working with the FAP, Chaudhry was troubled by the large number of sugar cane leases coming up for expiration in 1997. After the Constitution Review Commission was announced by Rabuka, the FLP and the NFP agreed to set aside their political differences and work towards a constitution that restored respect and dignity to the Indo-Fijian community. Chaudhry hoped that the sugar lease issue could be settled by the new constitutional initiative but the SVT refused to work with the NFU and Chaudhry, while NFP leader Jai Ram Reddy was interested in warming up to the new found friendship with the coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka.

During the constitution review process, the truce between the FLP and the NFP collapsed. Under a 'deal thrashed out secretly between Reddy, Rabuka and David Pickering representing the General Elector community, Reddy had given away two Indian communal seats to the general electors to make three seats for them (p. 177). Chaudhry was incensed by Reddy's magnanimous stand for he was of the opinion, based on evidence that the General Electors who traced their ancestry to European settlers in Fiji, had always sided with the Alliance Party and indigenous nationalists and did not support restoration of political rights to Indo-Fijians. Furthermore, Chaudhry was disturbed by the fact that the

1997 Constitution would be based on a preponderance of communal seats which was contrary to FLP's political position and vision. Despite Chaudhry's concern, Reddy and Rabuka ensured that the new 1997 Constitution passed both houses of parliament and Fiji was accepted back into the Commonwealth of Nations after a prolonged absence.

Chaudhry had enough with Rabuka and Reddy, and protested openly on the provision of communal seats in the House of Representatives. Chaudhry argued that communal seats allowed Fiji to remain trapped in ethnic based politics which led to ethnic conflict and military coups. However, the 1997 Constitution allowed the FLP and Mahendra Chaudhry to reinvent. In 1998 the party formed alliances with indigenous Fijian parties opposed to the SVT. What happened afterwards is a sad and unforgiving testament on indigenous Fijian nationalists not willing to accept the verdict of the people after the 1999 general elections. According to the NFU:

The nation went to the polls on 8 May. While both groups predicted victory for themselves, it became clear very early in the polls that Labour was heading for a landslide victory. It went on to win 37 seats, and its coalition partners together managed another 15, with 11 to the Fijian Association and four to PANU (p. 181).

The indigenous nationalist argued that the Chaudhry government was dominated by Indo-Fijians and that the government had 'suspicious' designs on native land and that the government could not be trusted. On 19 May 2000, indigenous nationalists and their sympathisers in the military invaded the Parliament and held the multiracial government of Mahendra Chaudhry hostage for fifty six days. During captivity, Chaudhry was threatened, physically abused and subjected to all forms of humiliation but he stood his ground and remained steadfast as some of his Members of Parliament held captive broke under pressure and were released at the whim of the hostage takers.¹ The military was divided and the military commander, Voreqe Bainimarama, misguidedly supported the aspirations of the 2000 coup, only to change his tune when he was threatened with an immediate execution by a faction of the military in November 2000 (p.196).

¹ Those released were: (Mrs) Suruj Nand, Lekh' Ram Vayeshnoi, Krishna Chand Sharma, John Ali, Ragho Nand, Anand Babla, Ami Chand, Pravin Singh, Gaffar Ahmed. Two days later, they released Michael Columbus who suffered from heart problems and Nareish Kumar who had taken ill' (p. 193).

Once Chaudhry was released from captivity, he argued his case for his return to power but the military had other plans. Voreqe Bainimarama had his core military staff bless the indigenous nationalist Laisenia Qarase to establish indigenous Fijian political hegemony. A new vehicle - the Soqosoqo ni Duavata ni Leweni Vanua Party (SDL) - was established later by Qarase and the Military. The SDL subsequently formed an alliance with the Conservative Alliance Matanitu Vanua (CAMV), the George Speight Group, much to the annoyance of Bainimarama. Following the 2000 coup, Chaudhry's indigenous Fijian partners started to behave erratically with Tupeni Baba converting to the indigenous nationalist cause (p.201). Besides being held hostage by armed indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians in areas that supported the George Speight coup were terrorised by indigenous Fijian thugs as many fled to safety and established a refugee camp at the Girit Centre in Lautoka (Trnka, 2008). Chaudhry was deeply troubled and led a number of campaigns both locally and overseas in support of displaced Indo-Fijians. Moreover, indigenous Fijian landowners refused to renew sugar cane farm leases of Indo-Fijian farmers, forcing many to abandon their homes. The NFU supported alternative accommodation for sugar cane farmers evicted from native land and campaigned for the protection of Indo-Fijian interests in the new parliament dominated by the SDL and the CAMV.

Concluding Remarks: Chaudhry Under Siege

Chaudhry was politically marginalised following the 2001 general election. The FLP fought for the retention of the 1997 Constitution and in particular for the multiparty cabinet, which placed considerable pressure on the SDL following the 2001 general election where the chiefs of Fiji quietly gave their blessings to the SDL government, to promulgate the blueprint on indigenous Fijian supremacy and affirmative action programs to marginalise struggling Indo-Fijians (p.213). However, unfortunately, Laisenia Qarase remained committed to his indigenous nationalist support base and attempted to wedge Mahendra Chaudhry by reintroducing bills which favoured the George Speight group. The military saw Qarase's moves as supporting the Speight group and in December 2006 deposed the SDL.²

² Immediately afterwards, Chaudhry, in a surprise move, joined the Bainimarama regime but reconsidered his position when Voreqe Bainimarama considered rescinding the 1997 Constitution. Chaudhry agreed with his arch nemesis, Laisenia Qarase that the best way forward was to agree on the President Josefa Iloilo's initiative for a mul-

Children of Indus shows that after independence in Fiji, Chaudhry remained the only Indo-Fijian who stood his ground and fought aggressively for the rights of workers and sugar cane farmers in Fiji; there were none others. There was also no one of another race who took up the battle against dictatorship and oppression in the country. The book makes no reference to the full list of Indians who were taken hostages in the 1987 coup, nor is there a list for those who were taken hostages in the 2000 coup.³ Had credit for Fiji's struggle for democracy been justly shared with

tiparty forum under the 1997 Constitution. Australian judges opined in the Court of Appeal decision in 2009 that the 2006 coup was illegal and as a result, the political order under the 1997 Constitution before the coup had to be restored. The coup makers panicked, abrogated the 1997 Constitution and later established a Constitution Review Commission under the leadership of constitutional expert Yash Ghai. Later the regime accused the Commission of being influenced by regional hegemonic powers. The Ghai draft report incensed the regime which accused the authors of disproportionately taking into consideration the views of non-government organisations. As a result, the Ghai Commission was disbanded and the military drafted its own 2013 Constitution and election rules. Despite repressive decrees outlawing freedom of expression, Chaudhry continued to fight for a non-ethnic inclusive constitution and rights of farmers and workers. The Bainimarama regime pursued Chaudhry by ensuring that he could not participate in the 2014 elections. Chaudhry was prosecuted for exchange control violations and not declaring income earned overseas. The FLP was in a quagmire in the lead up to the 2014 general election. Chaudhry was fighting the regime on allegations against him, while Bainimarama 'borrowed' FLP's non-ethnic and one person one vote ideas, and implemented proportional voting system. Chaudhry labelled these measures as 'tokens' and campaigned against the repressive decrees in the lead up to the 2014 election. FLP performed dismally, managing to receive only 11,670 votes in the 2014 election and failing to gain any seat in the Parliament.

³ Apart from those listed in the previous footnote as having been released by hostage takers, the entire text of the book mentions the names of only the following Indians, politicians or otherwise, who were alive at the time of the publication of the book: Jai Ram Reddy, Navin Maharaj, James Raman, Diwan Shankar, Attar Singh, Pratap Chand, Haroon Ali Shah, Jag Narayan Sharma, Hikmat Singh Verma, Dalpat Rathod, Krishna Datt, Dr. Ganesh Chand, Dr. Brij Lal, Dr. Satendra Nandan, Felix Anthony, Prem Singh, Hardip Singh, Ralph Khan, Bob Kumar, Uday Singh, Harish Sharma, Vijay R. Singh, Davendra Singh and Y P Reddy. Of this, all are cast in negative light either directly or indirectly except for Krishna Datt (mentioned 3 times), Y. R. Reddy (mentioned once), Dr. Ganesh Chand (mentioned once), Felix Anthony (mentioned once), Dr. Satendra Nandan (mentioned once) and 'a Canberra-based academic born in Labasa. Dr. Brij Lal' (mentioned once). Even his non-Indian colleagues in the FLP and/or the NFU are not mentioned except for Dr. Timoci Bavadra, Dr. Tupeni Baba, Poseci Bune, Adi Kuini Speed, Tevita Momoedonu, Michael Columbus, Mosese Volavola, Isireli Vuibau and Joeli Kalou. One also does not find a list of Ministers in the 1987 Labour-led Government nor in the 1999 Government.

all who played part, the rewards for Mahendra Chaudhry would have been sweeter.

But this aside, Chaudhry was a major player in Fiji's political development. There were attempts in the past to silence him but he continued his push for a better Fiji. Even after the 2000 coups, Chaudhry provided an alternative non-racial narrative to the ones professed by the SDL and the CAMV and at heart wanted the multiracial cabinet under the 1997 Constitution to work. However, the SDL government refused to provide political dialogue where policy and manifesto differences could be reconciled. For Chaudhry, this was a major breach of good faith in keeping with the provisions of power sharing in the 1997 Constitution. The Children of Indus continue to suffer.

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