

**Deconstructing Reddy's Politics:
A Review Essay on 'In The Eye of The Storm: Jai Ram
Reddy and the Politics of Postcolonial Fiji'**

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Often in these things, it is not a question of whether I am right or wrong or whether the other side is right. It is often a question of being able to understand and appreciate the feelings that lie behind the positions that we take up. What is my right may be my opponent's wrong and that which I perceive as right, correct and justifiable, may not be perceived by my opponents, who equally and fervently believe that their own position is right (Fiji Times, 23 September, 1993).

It is this quotation from the countless number of speeches and notes delivered by Jai Ram Reddy over his three decades of political and public life right at the core of Fiji's politics that perhaps most vividly illustrates Jai Ram Reddy's inherent style of leadership. With such a philosophy, Reddy joined the expanded Cabinet Sub-Committee on the Constitution that eventually produced the Terms of Reference for the Reeve's Commission that ultimately led to the adoption of the 1997 Constitution. Whether it was divine providence or sheer luck that a leader such as Reddy was politically active at such a crucial point of Fiji's history is unclear but it is definite that without his leadership many of the impasses that arose during the development of the Terms of References would have simply grounded the process to a halt. Reddy entered this process not only to complete the task at hand but to retrospectively maim the very roots of Fiji's recurrent issues by breaking down 'the fears that are at the back of these intense feelings' (p. 517) of racial divide and mistrust.

As the above quotation so rightly identifies, 'the hallmarks of Reddy's political and modus operandi was caution and moderation' (p. 191). Despite the greatest of adversities he stood on these principles even

when they threatened his widely recognised position as the prominent leader of the Indo-Fijian community.

Reddy was born on 12 May 1937 at Lautoka Hospital. He was the eldest child of Pethi and Yenkatama Reddy. Despite being a *Kamma* or a descendent from the warrior caste his actions as a political leader were far from those of his chest thumping, aggressive political counterparts and colleagues. Reddy spent a period of his student life at Sri Vivekananda High School which was the first non-Christian, non-government secondary school in Fiji. Reddy was one of the first batches to graduate from this institution. This was perhaps a foreshadow on Reddy's life as he went on to accomplish many first's as an Indo-Fijian such as his address to the Great Council of Chiefs, which became a defining moment of Fiji's history. Despite his average performance in school, his parents toiled hard to send him to New Zealand to study law. This became the impetus that moulded the leader Fiji as a whole came to admire and respect.

Reddy first came into public notice because of 'his abilities as an advocate' (p. 121). He brought these same skills into his political life as he realised the need to advocate for Indo-Fijian social, economic, educational and political rights. Reddy had a distinguished career in Fiji's judicial and legislative arena. The most notable of his achievements were his position as the Leader of the Opposition from 1977 to 1984 when he resigned due to his differences with the Speaker of the House. He resumed this role from 1992 to 1999 as the leader of the National Federation Party. His mainstream political life began in his role as an opposition nominated senator from 1972 to 1976 after which he was elected into the House of Representatives in April 1977. After his party's failure in the 1999 elections, Reddy retired from politics and continued his professional career in law. He was appointed as the President of the Fiji Court of Appeal in March 2000 from which he resigned in protest against the coup of 2000. From January 2002 until 2008 he worked as a Permanent Judge on the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. His failure to gain a seat in the Parliament in 1999 acted as a blessing in disguise as it availed Reddy the opportunity to be catapulted onto the international legal scene as one of its leading figures.

In the Eye of the Storm is perhaps not the biography of Jai Ram Reddy in the true sense of the word. It is a narration of Fiji's postcolonial history from the perspective of Reddy and in the process details the political manoeuvres that transpired and resulted in what Fiji symbolised as a nation by the year 2000. Corbett acknowledges that 'Political life histories' like what Lal produces in this book 'are more than mere stories about politicians or influential men and women – they focalise wider ide-

als, values and aspirations' which in this case are those of a nation's (2015:5). Brij Lal is undoubtedly an fitting author to write this book for various reasons. Firstly, his distinguished career as a historian and academic guarantees an objective and sensible interpretation of the events and political characters that are mentioned in the book. Furthermore, his knowledge of the nation is founded on years of research on various topics like indenture, Fiji politics and his direct involvement in the Reeve's Commission in addition to his opinions as an *insider* who as a former Fiji citizen experienced first-hand life as an Indo-Fijian. He himself acquiesces to this fact when he states in the text that 'I am a part of the history I am narrating, not a cold observer outside or above it' (p xvii). A level of subjectivity on the author's part allows the injection of empathy into the text as the events being recounted in the book have had long lasting and reverberating impact on the lives of past and future generations of Fiji's people. Lal relates elsewhere that the 'historical amnesia' preventing current generation of students in recognising Reddy and his party's contribution to Fiji was an impetus for him to complete and publish this text (2015: 66-7). The coups of 1987 and 2000 and the development and reviews of numerous constitutions have changed Fiji's social and political fabric permanently and Reddy the subject of this book has been at the centre of all these transformations while Lal observed and experienced this evolution. An added feather on Lal's authorial hat is the fact that this book serves as the next chapter to his commentary on the life of AD Patel titled *A Vision for Change: AD Patel and the Politics of Fiji* published in 1997 that also outlined NFP's progress as the embodiment of Indo-Fijian political movement in the pre-independence era. This gives Lal the added advantage of analysing Reddy's contribution to NFP's ethos, stances and actions while keeping in mind the wider context of Fiji's political situation. Lal's position as a Professor at Australian National University is also worth mentioning as ANU continues to be a constant attraction to Fiji born academics pursuing Post Graduate qualifications where a large volume of research funding is poured into analysing Fiji's history, politics, economy, legislature and culture.

Lal is at his academic best in writing this book; he put a decade of research on paper and forever immortalises facts that could have easily been lost or misrepresented in 'an ethnically divided society where public memory has long been racially archived' (2015: 59). For a researcher with his ability and the fact that he put ten years in researching the material for this book (not forgetting his lifelong observation of Fiji's transition), no one should be concerned about the reliability of the information presented. His research methods are commendable as well because he

consults a variety of sources in narrating Reddy's political life. Apart from his personal interview of Reddy, Lal scrutinises and presents analysis of documents he acquires from Reddy's personal collections. For added accuracy he consults Reddy's contemporaries whose voices are consistently and strategically inserted in the narration of Fiji's story that Lal weaves around the life of Jai Ram Reddy. Critics may oppose such a retelling of Fiji's history from one person's perspective as narrow but one has to note Reddy's impact on Fiji as a nation before making such insinuations. In fact, one cannot detach the Fiji of the 21st Century and the person Jai Ram Reddy; they are in most senses conterminous.

One of the main strengths of this book is that Lal instrumentalizes all his researched knowledge, expertise and former publications in analysing the events captured within the text. As a narrative historian his style of writing is simple, chronologically organised thus easy to follow and make sense of. His narrative technique makes readers feel as if they were physically present as the events being discussed were evolving. If nothing else one would be enthralled by the details Lal provides for each of the incidents that he outlines in the book. Readers would get the impression that are privy to privileged information, or get the sense that they have front row seats as history unfolds before them. He also throws in constant flash backs to contextualise events being discussed and does not assume that the reader has prior knowledge of Fiji's history. For example, when he discusses the internal bickering within the NFP during Reddy's time he makes an effort to clarify the foundations of some of these issues by recounting the events during the time of former leaders and what transpired during their respective leadership periods.

The author avoids a deliberate portrayal of Reddy in a positive light through the inclusion of 'alternative explanation' offered by Reddy's political opponents who cast him 'in the role of a villain, a divider, a second-fiddle player' (2015: 63). However, the narration of events are self-divulgatory revealing his characteristics, personality and principles that prove the contrary. While the author avoids deliberate portrayal of Reddy in a positive light, the narration of events are self-divulgatory in that they reveal his characteristics, personality and principles. For instance, Reddy's ability to 'unfold chaos' (p. 142) is clearly visible in the manner in which he resolves NFP's leadership wars between Irene Jai Narayan and Koya in 1977 by simply proposing the creation of two distinct and yet equally eminent leadership positions. Furthermore, Lal utilises the voice of other authors and journalists to bolster his description of Reddy's political presence and action. For instance, Lal states that Len Usher, a journalist and well-known political commentator, described Reddy's

criticism of the government's policies as 'penetrating but at the same time both responsible and constructive' (p. 191). This clearly represents Reddy as a responsible Leader of Opposition who provided criticism not only because it was required of him but because he saw it as his duty to see the best decisions made for the betterment of the nation despite not being in the ruling side who would obviously get credit for any positive decisions emerging from his contributions.

The book also gains archival significance through the clever use by Lal of original texts of speeches, messages and letters by Reddy and those engaged with him. This is important as Reddy was an eye witness of Fiji's political development observing it from 'close quarters' which means that his life can potentially 'afford close and intimate glimpses into the processes of politics in this period as well as insight into the personalities who drove them' (Lal, 2015: 59). What Lal masterfully terms *Interludes* appear at the conclusion of most chapters and they help tie up discussed events directly to the persona of Reddy. Jai Ram Reddy's *Cuvu Convention Address, 1981*, a copy of *The Deuba Accord, Fiji's Place in the Modern World: Jai Ram Reddy's Address to the Fijian Association Party May 3 1996*, Reddy's *Eulogy for Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau 1994* and most importantly Reddy's *Address to the Bose Levu Vakaturaga July 1997* find permanent residency within this book, thus becoming a source for the above mentioned documents. This becomes a useful literary style adding a sense of originality and authenticity to the entire publication. These serve as good breaks from Lal's summarising of incidents, events and occurrences to the presentation of actual words of Reddy and his colleagues. A read through these materials itself exhibits the frame of mind and stance of a man who became a respected and admired character among all communities who call Fiji home. Lal himself recognises this fact when he explains that his purpose in providing the *Interludes* is to present 'Reddy's own thoughts about his fears and concerns, his position on issues and his vision for the future' and to enable the reader to 'check my interpretations against the subjects own words' (p. xx).

The book does not generalise Reddy's perceptions but provides justification for why he thought what he thought and why he said what he said. For example, the book quotes Reddy stating: 'if you want something changed, you will have to reconcile so that you can accept some of your opponent's proposals and your own proposals, where some will remain and some thrown out' (p. 5). It then goes on to explain that Reddy developed such a liberal mind-set because he did not confine himself to orthodox sources of gaining advice and ideas like his political contemporaries. He realised that the conventional sources that included 'lawyers, busi-

nessmen, opportunists and hangers-on...was a closed circle that brooked no dissension and admitted few outsiders' (p. 6). This was in many ways unsuitable for addressing and resolving the problems facing Fiji. Thus, he widened his political scope by consulting 'trade unionists, small businessmen, professional women, academics and dedicated community workers' (p. 6).

Reddy is also portrayed as a leader who 'showed remarkable ability to engage with Fijian leaders like Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, Ratu Josefa Iloilo and even hardliners like Apisai Tora' (p. 6), mainly in 'a dark period of political persecution, rampant racism and religious bigotry against Indo-Fijians on a scale never seen before' (Lal, 2015: 59). Lal identifies Reddy's bravery in his act of walking up to the September 1987 coup frontman, Rabuka, to relate the need to end the harassment of the Indo-Fijian community that transpired as a direct result of the political instability in the nation initiated by Rabuka himself. In the post-coup years Lal notes that Reddy 'brought out the best in Rabuka' (p. 9) as well, even to the point of convincing him to review the pro-Fijian 1990 constitution that upheld all things Rabuka had provided as justification for overthrowing the elected government. It was also his coalition with Rabuka and his *Soqosoqo Vakavulewani Taukei* (SVT) that revealed Reddy to be an honourable man. '[D]espite knowing the dangers of coalescing with the SVT for the 1999 elections he still went ahead and did it' (p. 17). He believed that agreeing to the coalition was the honourable thing to do after Rabuka's efforts in the review of the constitution.

Nonetheless, as all objective authors are obliged to do, Lal also identifies the negative aspects of Reddy's leadership which helps silence the would be critics. For example, the text points out how during the mid-1990s when work was being done on the constitution, Reddy became so engrossed in this national issue that he more or less forgot to pay attention to those day to day issues that at times bear more prominently on people's lives. While the review of the constitution was vital especially for the sake of the Indo-Fijian community what Reddy and his party should have done was to create the bridge of understanding that would help the masses comprehend how the constitution would be the greater good in the long run. It was this failure that drew a symbolic wedge between the community and Reddy's party, thus, allowing them to be 'misinformed' by NFP's political opponents. It became common practice during Fiji Labour Party rallies for the constitution to be compared with FLP's manifesto and then shoving the constitution under the table to declare the manifesto as the document that would ultimately put 'food on people's table' (p. 683).

Lal's assumptions that form the foundation of this book could also have been realigned to cater for the needs of a wider readership. For instance, Lal assumes for the purpose of this book that 'the public self is the real self' (p. xv) so he portrays Reddy's public life and his engagement with the dominant political issues and concerns of his time. While this can be seen as Lal's attempt to streamline his approach on the life of a man who was socially and politically versatile, some sections of the reading public would have also appreciated a more in-depth personal account of his life. This is simply because Reddy's experiences as a person, a husband and a father could have provided the added angle on how he came to be who he was and why he performed as he performed when at the prime of his public life.

Lal's discussions in the book could raise some vital questions among readers for which he deliberately or innocently does not provide any definite answers. Lal notes that the essential course Reddy attempted to chart for his people and his visions of their place in the larger scheme of things was intrinsically right. However, the complete loss and humiliation of the NFP and Reddy in the 1999 elections indicated the Indo-Fijian community's failure to comprehend and accept this vision. While Lal states that the causes of why the Indo-Fijian community deserted Reddy and 'all that he stood for is a matter for legitimate debate and discussion', (p. xvi) he does not provide any definite answers why this was so. From the perspective of a fan of history it would have been better if Lal had been more forthcoming in this regard as it would have represented a significant point of discussion. This is simply because as a researcher, historian and academic he would have provided a weighty response that could have explained the fears and perceptions of Indo-Fijians that apparently ran deeper than what even a seasoned political leader like Reddy had presumed to have grasped.

One of the major deterrents to the reading of this text is its length - the book exceeds 700 pages. This would have much value to historians than to ordinary readers of history. But Lal's narrative style may allow many hesitant readers to go beyond their usual dosage of facts and figures. While the text is titled *In the Eye of the Storm* one has to read a good 300 pages to fully comprehend the background that leads to the eventual storm. Nonetheless, when Lal does arrive at the *storm* he does spend a substantial amount of time dissecting the events thoroughly thus providing enriching information to readers and researchers. Lal in a sense takes the readers by their hand and guides them through the storm and into the final chapters of the book that concentrate on the aftermath of the storm and how it went on to change Fiji's political scene permanently.

Chapter ten, for instance, focuses on Reddy's days after the election loss and how he returned to his law practice and later on to his international appointments. In a nutshell the entire book appears to be the story of a patriotic, selfless and determined leader whose life of achievements is overturned into failure at the hands of relatively few weak moments of decision making.

Jai Ram Reddy comes across in this book as a medium of change as well as a reflection of that change. He depicts the issues that riddled Fiji's political arena when he arrived on this stage in the mid-1970's and then continued for three decades at the helm of the Indo-Fijian and national leadership. Lal notes that Reddy showed promise as a leader because unlike most of his predecessors he came with 'freshness and lacking in political baggage' (p. 367). For Reddy politics was not a lifelong vocation but a means through which much good could be attained for the people and the nation. Lal quotes him as saying 'one does not have to be in parliament to serve the people' (p. 15) and anyone who perceives leadership as such is ultimately the best person to be in parliament or a leader. It was precisely because of such embodiment of leadership by Reddy that he was able to put relentless efforts in the face of indifference by those in power.

Whether it was coups, racial politics or opposition from Indo-Fijian sections, Reddy was always in the thick of things carefully plotting the course out of the dilemmas. Perhaps his vision was too wide for everyone to comprehend because even out of the coups of 1987, the worst of circumstances to affect the Indo-Fijian community, Reddy drew out positives. He is quoted by Lal as saying 'the coup did many bad things, but it made both Fijian and Indians realize that coexistence is not enough. The two races must become one nationality' (p. 441). This is without doubt the legacy of Jai Ram Reddy that is recognised by Lal in this book. It has also become generically evident over the years to the wider community. It was his genuineness that was the most likely reason why it was decided that 'there was no one better to put the case (of the constitution)' before the GCC 'than the eloquent leader of the opposition' who stood up to the challenge and secured victory for the entire nation (p. 624). For Lal this was 'Reddy's finest moment in politics, remembered warmly across time' (p. 625). This was again Reddy reaching out to *the other side* for reconciliation, negotiation and compromise. Through such endeavours Reddy accomplished what was unprecedented any time else in Fiji or anywhere else in the world; the restoration of democratic power after the forceful removal of a government at the point of a gun.

It was Martin Luther King who said that *the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at the times of challenge and controversy*. Fiji faced many challenges in the period Jai Ram Reddy was politically active. However, whenever things turned ugly Reddy was ever present at the very centre, at the core of the situation, right in the eye of the storm.

References

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