

Tears in Paradise: A Personal and Historical Journey 1879 – 2004

by Rajendra Prasad, 2004.

293 pages including photographs and appendices

Auckland: Glade Publishers.

\$29.95. ISBN 0-476-00630-9

Avinash Kumar

Something is amiss in a paradise. Rajendra Prasad's 'Personal and Historical Journey' reveals the sufferings of the Indo-Fijian community, under the indenture system and later at the hands of the ethnic Fijian nationalists after the coups of 1987 and 2000.

The author, a non-academic Indo-Fijian now residing in New Zealand, left Fiji after the 1987 military coups. He claims to be a victim of the coups; as such his views are personal, and may not be shared by all.

This thirteen-chapter book is divided into two parts – Part One (*Struggles of a Forgotten Generation*) covers the indenture period in Fiji from 1879 to 1919, and Part Two (*An Uncertain Future*) covers the post-indenture era from 1920 to 2004. The first chapter is written in narrative form, which gives a personal account of the author's journey to his ancestral roots. This brought jubilation to the author as he notes that it 'renewed my pride and heritage...and created in me a hunger to read, research and write about the enigma surrounding *girit*' (p. 43).

This hunger inspired the first part of the book where the author gives a detail account of the indenture period. Here he outlines the culture and caste system as well as the recruitment of labourers in India and their dispersal throughout Fiji. Plantation life was filled with violence, appalling working and living conditions, which led to murder, confusion and suicide amongst many indentured labourers. Indenture in Fiji was 'a system of manipulation, domination, intimidation and exploitation of human labour, and mental and physical violence were mercilessly used to increase productivity and raise the profitability of the white planters' (pp. 9-10). But it also gave life to a new Indo-Fijian culture distinct from the caste system practiced in

India, which prevented any form of interaction between people of different caste or even religions.

Prasad also describes how the system came to an end how the Indo-Fijians with limited resources were able to make schools to educate their children. This allowed their children to enter into other works of life away from the sugarcane farms.

Another area explored by the author was the strained relationship between the CSR (Colonial Refinery Company) and the Indo-Fijian farmers. He notably highlights the systematic nature in which the former exploited the latter by paying low prices for their cane and made huge profits. The struggles with CSR forced the farmers to form unions that later became voice of the Indo-Fijians for political demands.

Prasad also beautifully describes interesting episodes of village life of the Indo-Fijians in the 1940's to the 1960's. Anecdotes of various places make the reader imagine the scenery of the village life.

After independence in 1970, the politics of Fiji took a new shift, as 'race' became part of politics – a legacy of the British 'divide and rule' policy. The author gives details of how the Alliance Party (a predominantly ethnic Fijian political party) under Ratu Mara was able to rule for seventeen years while the National Federation Party (a predominantly Indo-Fijian political party) remained in the Opposition.

By the end of 1980's, Fiji's politics took another twist as a 'culture of coups' emerged. The book eloquently describes how the Indo-Fijians were traumatized by the 1987 and 2000 coups and the author gives an analysis of the two events from his own perspective. He concludes by arguing that the future will remain bleak for the Indo-Fijian community unless national leaders take the challenge to bring a change.

Generally, the author is successful in achieving the aims of the book by highlighting the sufferings of the Indo-Fijians for the two periods. The simple language used in the book will allow it to be read by a wider audience than academics and students. The author has used concrete data from other sources but on a number of occasions it has not been acknowledged.

The author's description about the whole indenture period is commendable though it is not original because several authors, the prominent ones being Ahmed Ali, Brij Lal, and K.L. Gillion, have already done similar research. This book will not be new to those who have read or studied the history of Indo-Fijians but definitely would be a great source for those trying to grasp it for the first time.

The author's personal views throughout the book will certainly raise some questions in the minds of readers. He condemns the British (Colonial)

Government, the CSR company and the Australian government for 'robbing freedom, liberty and rights' of the Indo-Fijians and calls them an axis of evil. If one thinks critically, the indenture system also had benefited the labourers as the latter secured a better future for their posterity hence liberating a generation from many uncertainties.

The author believes the indenture system has left a 'stigma of shame' (p. 11) on the lives of the successive generations of Indo-Fijians. This is a wrong perception. Indo-Fijians, like any other people, are proud of their ancestors and talk highly about their sacrifice and traumatic experience. Their past history has enabled them to face many challenges in Fiji and that could be a reason many have remained till today despite facing many hurdles. Perhaps that stigma is only among those Indo-Fijians who had left Fiji and not with those who still believe Fiji is their only homeland.

The author again blames ethnic-Fijians and their leaders for the sufferings of Indo-Fijians through the coups. This generalisation does not hold much water because only a handful of ethnic-Fijians and only a handful of ethnic Fijian leaders were responsible for causing the problems while majority are law-abiding citizens. There are some Indo-Fijians and their leaders who should equally be blamed for the troubles, which unfortunately the author barely mentions. One wonders what the reasons for this obvious neglect are.

Overall, however, this book reveals the story of the Indo-Fijian sufferings from one perspective which has truth but also exaggerations. It will certainly allow the readers to think from the 'other' perspective(s).

Avinash Kumar is an MA (Governance) student at the University of the South Pacific, Suva.