

## The Stresses and Strains of Multiracial Living

Anirudh Singh

### Two parts to the human

The visitor had been waiting in the secretary's room for some time. He was the father of the student who had been missing from her home over the weekend. I could not see what I could possibly do to help, but I asked the secretary to let him in anyway.

He was in his late forties, and as he walked into the office, I could see the pain on his face. His eyes were bleary with worry, and when he spoke, his voice was a hoarse whisper. I walked around my desk and met him in the visitor reception area.

He began talking immediately, words tumbling out of his mouth in an uncontrolled manner. He told me his daughter was not the type of girl to go out night-clubbing, that she was a serious girl who took her studies seriously. He did not know what could have happened to her. In his desperation, he began openly blaming the girl who we were told she had accompanied that Friday night.

He was a man in despair, clutching at straws, hoping for the smallest hope. He told me he would let her do anything she liked once she came back. He did not mind at all. He just wanted to have her back.

I could see clearly what was happening to him. He was a desperate father crying out for help. He was pleading with me to do something – anything.

As the Director of the educational institution, I knew there was little I could do to help. But I wanted to sound helpful, so I promised that I would provide him with whatever information that I could gather that would help him find his daughter.

He was an ethnic Fijian. Yet I knew exactly how he felt. And I could do this for one simple reason. I realised what I would have felt like had I been in a similar situation. His feelings were those of a father in distress. And all male parents would feel the same way if they went through

the same unfortunate experience.

Contrary to commonly-held beliefs about race, we are all essentially the same when it comes to basic emotions and needs. Or put more appropriately, the differences between us that characterise our ethnicities are small compared to the sameness that characterises our common humanity. And this, I believe, provides one of the most important keys to the solution of the problems of multi-ethnicity.

*All people are essentially the same regardless of their race, because they are all humans.*

This sameness amongst people cannot be emphasised too much. We have the same basic needs, both physical and emotional. To survive, everyone needs food, sleep and shelter, irrespective of race. They all enjoy the comforts of life to the same extent. You enjoy spending a lazy afternoon watching TV or reading, whether you are a Fijian, Tongan or Indo-Fijian. A child loves ice-cream. The fact that she is a Chinese or Samoan is immaterial. In these basic needs we are all the same. We also have the same sense of sadness, joy, loss, distress and euphoria. All races have the same feelings.

### Our differences

There are, however, obvious differences between ethnic groups. Each has a unique system of culture, customs and traditions, language and associated systems of social and religious values. This is very important to every individual within the group. The Indo-Fijian mother would take great pains to ensure that all the rituals and customs are adhered to at her daughter's wedding. It would be unthinkable for her to entertain a ceremony (in the case of a Hindu *sanatani* wedding) without the *dwaar pooja*. Everything would have to be exactly right. A Fijian mother would perform a different set of rituals in the case of a Fijian wedding, but with the same pride and joy as the Indo-Fijian mother.

Each ethnic group has its own special ceremony for birth, marriage and death. And they simply have to be performed in the traditional way. The rituals associated with death are so important, for instance, that government agencies often spend vast amounts of time and money identifying bodies of people involved in disasters and ensuring that their remains are transported back to the next of kin so that the final rights can be performed according to their own customs and traditions. No one can ignore the culture, customs and traditions of a people. To do so would be considered inhumane.

*The culture and traditions of a people are very precious to them, as they are an essential part of their identity.*

To summarise, there are two things that we must realise about people. They are humans first and foremost. The vast majority of their characteristics and needs are human. But they also possess distinct cultural identities. And this small difference between them is an important difference that cannot be ignored.

### **The core of racial conflict**

Human conflicts can arise out of a sense of injustice, from the feeling of having been wronged. But surprisingly, they may also arise from misunderstandings. And these are frequently created simply by not knowing enough about each other. Not knowing creates suspicion. You begin to think that others have ill intentions against you. Suspicion leads to fear, and sometimes it even evokes feelings of hatred. Extended suspicion leads to paranoia.

All this is true especially of race relations. Good relations are not possible as long as there is suspicion and distrust between races, and understanding and goodwill is lacking.

***To promote good relations between races, you must first develop trust and goodwill between them.***

Trust and goodwill leads naturally to an understanding of the others needs and problems, and to a lasting empathy for their welfare. This forms the starting point for the establishment of good relations between races. In the ideal case, a multiracial country becomes like one large family which accepts the racial differences between its people as a fact of life, while paying great heed to the common needs.

Without good race relations, a multiracial society tends to break up into ethnic clusters held together only by common necessity. Real multiracial societies are always somewhere in between these two extremes.

We can learn a lot about how multiracialism evolves from our two next-door neighbours Australia and New Zealand. While each started off as what were essentially racially monolithic societies where the indigenous race had been subjugated, the waves of settlers who came later have not assimilated into the main society as seamlessly as some would have desired. The breaking up of modern Australia into racially-segregated pockets was a source of constant concern for John Howard when he was Prime Minister of Australia.

The social and cultural differences between ethnic groups often lead

to differences in aptitudes and abilities. One group, for instance, may produce better sportsman and musicians than the other, while the other may be more adept with the skills required for economic progress in life. This creates a problem. For the difference in aptitudes may lead to differing levels of economic success, resulting in one ethnic group becoming generally wealthier than the other. And this racial gap tends to get wider with time. Another oft-quoted example is the education gap between ethnic groups, notably Fijians and Indo-Fijians.

Clearly these widening gaps cannot be allowed to go unchecked, and governments world-wide have tried affirmative action plans of one sort or another to contain this problem.

### **A solution in principle**

There is no easy way of solving all racial conflicts everywhere. Human beings are much too complex to allow us the understanding to achieve such success.

*You can never really resolve racial conflicts once they start. Often the best you can do is to contain them.*

The world is full of examples of conflicts based on cultural and religious differences. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is well known, as is the long war waged by the IRA in Northern Ireland. The various conflicts that plagued the Balkans, and have been (arguably) the cause of world wars and the more recent Balkan crises, all had their origins in ethnic and religious differences, chiefly between the Serbs and the other ethnic groups that have populated the region for centuries. The African conflicts of the 1990s, such as the Rwandan genocide of 1994, were mostly rooted in ethnic differences. The 'ethnic cleansing' that occurred in Eastern Europe and Africa during these conflicts is a clear indication of their ethnic nature.

Some of these problems are centuries old. In the case of Kosovo, the conflict between the Serbs and the Albanians had its origins in 1389, when the Serbs fought a losing battle against the invading Turks. And the current war against terrorism in which the USA battles *Al Qaeda* is nothing but a continuation of the age-old conflict between Christians and Muslims that has been on-going since the Crusades.

But while we may not be able to solve all conflicts, we can still gain a basic insight into methods for their containment and possible resolution by making a few simple observations. Racial conflicts often arise when there is mutual suspicion and distrust, and when there are differences in

aptitudes that make one ethnic group do better than another. It follows therefore that to solve racial conflicts, one must:

1. Create trust and goodwill between the races
2. Deal with the disparities arising from differences in aptitudes

To see how we can do this, we must go back to our observation of the nature of the human organism. Because people of different races are essentially the same, they want to be treated as equal. Because the cultural heritage of each individual is precious to him or her, you can create trust and goodwill by showing that you honour and respect their cultural heritage. Finally, some active steps must be taken to reduce the disparities that arise from differences in aptitudes.

To summarise, there are three simple rules for the promotion racial harmony:

1. Treat other races as equal
2. Respect their systems of values
3. Deal with the disparities

An example of good race relations is provided by Sushila Wati, a 42-year-old Indo-Fijian who lives in the village of Naluwai, Naitasiri. According to the Fiji Times, (6 Feb 2007: 8), Sushila moved to the village to mind the shop owned by her husband's family when they were married. Sushila is a fluent speaker of the Naitasiri dialect (the language spoken in the Naitasiri province of Fiji). She says she is used to the Fijian cultural system, and understands it just like any Fijian girl in the village. She identifies herself as *Kai Rara*, which roughly means that she treats herself and her family as part of the big Fijian family formed by the villagers. At the passing away of her husband, Sushila was surprised when the whole *vanua* (the villagers as a whole) came to pay its respects. Said Sushila:

It was really touching to know that the *vanua* and all its chiefs do care about us on this land. I was really touched because we had expected them to come, but not as a village.... The *Ratu* even gave a eulogy...

Sushila's family enjoys both traditional Fijian food such as dalo and bele as well as the traditional Indian roti and curry. She provides her own explanation for the good relations:

The main tools in the ensuring of good race relations amongst neighbours are understanding and tolerance for each other's differences.

One may say that this is a rather special case. It is a relationship between one Indo-Fijian family and the local Fijian community. One can, therefore, argue that it is not directly applicable to whole communities because of its one-to-many nature. But one can still learn a lot from this example.

Of course, it is far better to prevent conflicts from occurring in the first place. To be able to do this, one should be able to identify potential causes of conflict and remove them if this is possible, and to read the signs of developing conflict.

How have our Fijian governments tackled these issues of multi-racialism in our country in the past?

### Dealing with racial disparity – Fiji government style

Governments have used their own methods to solve racial problems. In the case of Fiji, even a cursory look at the affirmative action plans they have used in the past reveals how inadequate they were.

There seems to be little reasoning behind them. Under these schemes, policies were adopted in an arbitrary manner. Most seem to have been formed out of the political necessity to gain (or regain) political power rather than a sincere desire to solve the ethnic issue.

The history of affirmative action plans to improve the lot of Fijians goes back to pre-independence. But best remembered are the affirmative action plans of the Alliance government under the leadership of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. Following the 1987 coup, the Rabuka-commissioned 1990 Constitution had special provisions for 'the protection and enhancement of Fijian and Rotuman interests'. Chapter 3 (section 21) specifically allowed for the enactment of laws 'with the object of promoting and safeguarding the economic, social, educational, cultural, traditional and other interests of the Fijian and Rotuman people'. It was to achieve these objectives by reserving, in consultation with the GCC, such proportions of scholarships, training privileges and other special facilities, permits or licenses for the operation of businesses for Fijians and Rotumans as were deemed necessary.

Qarase's 2001 Blueprint for the Protection of Fijian and Rotuman Rights and Interests and the Advancement of their Development was a similarly arbitrarily constructed plan to find a solution to Fiji's cultural mismatch issue. Apart from writing a new Constitution that would, amongst other things, have ensured that the Prime Minister and President were always Fijians, the blueprint set out to convert Crown Schedule A

and B land to native land, replace ALTA by NLTA, and introduce affirmative action laws to accompany the proposed new Constitution.

There was also a Blueprint for the Affirmative Action on Fijian Education that was supposed to be the long sought-after panacea for the education gap between Fijians and others. Amongst other things, it set out to build a special Form 7 College for Fijians alone, provide computers and telecom equipment to Fijian schools, and establish a Centre of Excellence in each province where Fijian students had access to the best teachers and equipment.

What one found particularly objectionable about the blueprint was that it was a *plan for Fijians by Fijians* for their future. This statement has all the hallmarks of racial conceit, suspicion and distrust that can only come from an immature and paranoid mind.

The Constitution never saw the light of day, thanks to the celebrated Chandrika Prasad case in which the 1997 Constitution was declared still valid. But the Social Justice Act which encapsulated most of the affirmative action policies was passed in 2001. The Qoliqoli and Land Claims Tribunal bills which were part of the plan were indeed tabled in the House. And the \$20m interest-free loan to Fijian Holdings Ltd was in fact turned into a grant.

All these affirmative action policies for Fijians that have been implemented since the days of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara have been largely ineffectual.<sup>1</sup> Far from achieving the ethnic equity that they set out to create, they have only managed to sustain a state of racial discrimination against the more successful of the communities. The country as a whole, and ethnic groups within it, have suffered as a result. Indo-Fijians have suffered the most under this system of state-sanctioned racial discrimination. Generations were borne and brought up under such prevailing racial conditions. Most have never known a fairer situation, and have thus accepted these racially biased conditions as a fact of life. They have become used to being treated unequally.

Indo-Fijian school leavers take it for granted that they will receive inferior treatment to Fijians in their applications for government jobs. Fresh teacher graduates seeking jobs have to be content to wait days if not weeks at the Ministry's offices for attention while their Fijian counterparts receive favoured treatment. Other civil service job opportunities are similarly weighted against Indo-Fijians. It has become an accepted fact of

<sup>1</sup> But note the article by Maika Nadumu (Fiji Sun, 11 Feb 2007: 5) in which he claims that there had been a measured improvement in Fijian school results as a consequence of these affirmative action plans.

life amongst Indo-Fijians that merit alone will not do

The 2006 'clean-up' by Bainimarama was the first ray of hope Indo-Fijians had in two generations of the possibility of a break from such discrimination. For the first time in more than thirty years, they saw the chance of a fairer treatment from the state. The natural result was that a large proportion of Indo-Fijians were in favour of the military takeover. However, this did not come without a sense of guilt. Many are now faced with the moral dilemma over whether the 'levelling of the racial field' that has been promised by the military take-over can justify the illegal overthrow of a democratically-elected government. This is because most Indo-Fijians are well groomed in the basic principles of justice, freedom and democracy through their formal school education or other informal modes of learning.

### Creating Trust

We saw that to prevent racial conflict one needs to create trust and goodwill between different races. How can this be achieved?

The first step to trust, goodwill and understanding between races comes with learning about each other. And this occurs best with interaction at the personal level between members of the two communities. Learning provides knowledge of each other's cultures and traditions. Good learning also demonstrates the essential sameness between ethnic groups. Knowing dispels the suspicion and paranoia that existed before, and replaces it with an empathy for each other's welfare.

It is within the culture, customs, traditions and language that the systems of values characteristic of a race lie. It is imperative to find out what these are, so that you can treat them with sensitivity and respect. This is perhaps the most important role of the learning process.

Learning must start at the earliest age. This means that schools must be involved. However most of the required learning is informal learning.

This is learning by seeing, listening and doing, learning by actually participating in the cultural activities you are trying to learn about. It is not text-book learning. It cannot be performed satisfactorily in a classroom.

Thus this calls for the inclusion of cultural and social activities in schools in which the students (and perhaps the parents also) participate. These activities could include plays and theatre enacting cultural and milestone historical events important to each ethnic group, celebrations of religious festivals at school, and competitions encouraging the learning of

each other's languages.

Such a scheme will unfortunately run into serious problems with the education authorities in Fiji. Our third world mindset is highly development-oriented. And this imposes special requirements on our education system. It forces our school curricula to give declarative learning (i.e. text-book learning) of job-oriented subjects the highest priority. This favours achievers, whose sole goal in education is to pass exams that will enable them to climb higher on the academic ladder. This provides little encouragement for student participation in activities relating to personal development, especially in the area of race relations.

One way such activities can be brought into schools is through regulation. This will be a forced method, and it is doubtful whether students will respond positively to them. Another way is through an incentive scheme, where students are offered rewards for successful participation in such cultural activities. A specific example is the organisation of school competitions that test the students' knowledge of other cultures, languages and values.

This was exactly the aim of the Human Rights and Values program launched at USP's Lautoka Campus (then known as Fiji Centre Western) in 2004 jointly by the Centre and the Ministry of Education. Its aim was to create opportunities for inter-cultural learning in schools through such activities as competitions, debates and cross-cultural events where students from one ethnic group performed items demonstrating the cultural values of the other. It was successful in implementing the first two stages of this program by the second year of its inception. The inter-cultural events should prove most fruitful once they are implemented.

### **The Ethnic Mismatch Issue: Why the Disparity**

Economic disparity arises from different aptitudes for economic performance. There are many possible reasons why this occurs. There could be cultural constraints that inhibit people from participating freely in activities leading to economic success, and differences in work ethics, to name a few.

But generally speaking, one expects any ethnic group to be good at something at least. The reasoning is simple. To do a thing well, you must learn to do it first. Learning requires time and effort. Usually, an ethnic group of people will favour certain activities and pre-occupations over others. They will devote the greater part of their time to these activities, and become good at them. The other activities will be poorly attended to.

Their skills for handling these latter activities will be less developed, resulting in their poor performance in these areas.

Take the examples of sports and study. Students at a school who are better at sports will want to spend more time in this activity as compared to study. One therefore expects that they will make better sportsmen than students who are relatively better at study. These latter will be expected to do better at their studies, but not so well at sports.

Another way of putting this is to say that there is an economy of aptitudes amongst people. Some are good at one thing and not so good at others. We see that because all ethnic groups devote special emphasis on some preferred activity (or activities), the net result is that an ethnic group is good at one thing at the expense of others, i.e., there is an economy of aptitudes amongst ethnic groups.

### **Striving for Equity of Aptitudes**

One way of reducing the disparity between ethnic groups is to change the systems of economic values so that there is a better division of the wealth of the country. For example, music and sports are still not mainstream economic activities in the Pacific. Establishing sports and music industries where the performers are paid well will favour those Pacific Islanders who are good at these activities. One only has to look at our performance in sevens rugby to see what this can mean. But it is clear that this strategy will result in only partial success.

The fool-proof method of ensuring ethnic equity is to ensure that all people, regardless of their ethnicities, acquire the same aptitudes. This has to be brought about through an active process, and it calls for some sort of fundamental change in the way a particular ethnic group perceives and does things.

We are forced to conclude that, to ensure an ethnic group succeeds economically, it must have the same economic aptitudes as the successful ones. This almost certainly means some change in the systems of values of the group. But this is tantamount to changing their identities. It is the very thing Fijians have been afraid of.

### **Change is Natural**

We must change our perceptions of ourselves if we are to succeed. Social and cultural change are quite natural. Societies change to accommodate to their changing environments. These are often (but not always)

brought about by the technological changes modern living imposes on the individual, requiring a change in life-style and/or system of economic values.

The fear that one will lose all if one changed with the times and circumstances is natural. But it is unreasonable. Many races have survived in new situations without losing their identities. And they have been successful because they were willing to accommodate to their new environments. The Chinese have been migrating from the mainland to all corners of the world ever since the beginning of recorded history. They went to America with the gold diggers, and later Hawaii, and the Pacific. They have been economically successful anywhere they went, simply because they were willing to change their ways a little and accommodate to the new situation.

The Chinese have not lost their identities as a result of these small compromises. The reason for this is simple. There is always a basic cultural core that is preserved no matter how different the new socio-economic environment is from your place of birth. This core includes ones language, religion and the basic rituals of life.

*One's cultural core can withstand the challenges of any new environment. It never dies.*

Other races have also migrated, either forcibly or willingly, from their place of birth and retained their identities. Most notable amongst these are Indians, who, like the Chinese, form a diaspora that spans every corner of the world.

Fijians should be no different from the Chinese and the Indians in this. So their fear of losing their cultural identities is quite unreasonable.

### **A New Model of Social Evolution**

If Fijians are to prosper economically, they will have to adopt a model of social evolution that sees them adopting the same economic values as others, while retaining their social and cultural core. This may sound like a tall order, but it may be achievable if all the people of this multiracial nation adopt a model of social evolution which is unifying rather than divisive.

This model perceives the socio-economic evolution of the country towards a common goal. To be more specific, instead of viewing different races as developing socio-economically in their own separate ways, it views other races and Fijians advancing socially and economically towards *a common social ideal – the Modern Fiji Islander*.

This is an ideal where every citizen of the new nation retains his or her core of culture, language and tradition while enjoying the same modern consumer comforts and trappings of technological advancements as the rest. As each race retains its core identity in this picture of social evolution, Fijians should find such a model of special appeal.

### **The Education Gap: The Way Forward**

We need to acknowledge that there are indeed differences in the economic and academic performances of the average Fijian as compared to others. We also need to accept that the previous government had invested heavily in their affirmative action plans. We must not dismantle these projects and schemes totally, as this will be a terrible financial wastage.

We should still address the mismatch issue, but do so in a professional and informed way. We first note that previous governments made no attempt to appeal to any espoused theory of sociology or human behaviour to arrive at their plans or to justify them. It is doubtful whether many of the school teachers and principals who implemented the plans had the type of relevant specialist knowledge and training needed to understand the principles behind a soundly-constructed affirmative action plan. This was needed if they were to achieve the stated objectives of the government regardless of the shortcomings of their policies.

What is needed as a first step is the appointment of a team of professionals to address the problem. These will be people (of any race, colour or creed) who have the necessary academic background and/or the experience and a track record in successfully dealing with ethnic mismatch issues. We need the best people to solve our problem. They may all turn out to be Fijians, but in all probability, it will be a team of diverse cultural and national origins.

There are probably numerous possible plans to address the education gap issue in a professional and scientific manner. To take Qarase's blueprint as an example, one such plan would be to

- First determine the outcomes of Qarase's blueprint to ascertain its successes and failures
- Formulate a preliminary hypothesis (for instance, that we need multi-racial schools to close the education gap)
- Test this hypothesis by collecting data that is already available (for example by comparing the performance of Fijians in multi-racial schools to those from racially-segregated schools)

- Use these preliminary findings and new ideas from a specially-tasked think tank to formulate a new theory (this could be, for example, that multiracial schools are not enough – we need to bring together the parents too somehow)
- Implement this new theory (for instance, build a multiracial school which allows for increased levels of parental interaction via school-based social events etc)
- Give this plan five years, and then compare the new outcomes (that is, student academic and economic performance from this institute) to the older ones (student performances in racially-segregated schools)
- If the results are still not good enough, review the theory, and test the new one through the same procedure.

The basis for this approach is derived from the well-understood problem-solving strategy of doing a situational analysis of the problem, formulating a theory, implementing and testing it, and reviewing it in light of the results of the trial run.

This is the scientific approach. And educationists and sociologists all over the world would take immense interest in the outcomes of such an affirmative action plan.

**Anirudh Singh** is Associate Professor of Physics at the University of the South Pacific, Suva. Email: [singh\\_ag@usp.ac.fj](mailto:singh_ag@usp.ac.fj)