



Some dimensions of Fiji's recent emigration

Azmat Gani

This paper investigates some dimensions of Fijian emigration since the political crisis of 1987. While Fiji has historically been a migrant recipient country, during the last four decades the reverse has been the case. Emigration increased significantly following the political crisis of 1987. The preferred destinations have been Australia followed by Canada, the United States and New Zealand. Fijians of Indian descent have been the main emigrant ethnic group, accounting for 84–90 per cent of all emigrants between 1986 and 1997. Emigration has reduced the Fiji Indian population, which was the dominant ethnic group prior to the first coups in 1987. Rates of emigration will no doubt intensify following the May 2000 coup.

Azmat Gani is a lecturer in Economics at Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman. He was formerly a Senior Economist with the Reserve Bank of Fiji.

Permanent and long-term migration from Fiji has increased in the post coup years (Table 1). In response to the events of 1987, massive migration, including the permanent departure of highly qualified and professionally trained people, occurred with numbers soaring from an annual average of 2,711 during 1981–85 to 5,149 during 1986–90 and 5,715 during 1991–97 (South Pacific Economic and Social Database 1998). The exodus of professionals, skilled and technical workers continues unabated. Recent reports indicate that 1,425 people emigrated in the first quarter of 2000 (*Fijilive.com*, 16 May 2000). Official statistics indicate that between 1987 and 1997, 52,000

Fijians emigrated to high-income countries (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 1998). To this number must be added migrants who went to high-income countries on short-term or temporary visas and subsequently acquired permanent residency status, which are not accounted for by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics. The total number of Fijian residents living in high-income countries as permanent residents is estimated to be greater than official statistics suggest, with earlier reports indicating the number could be as high as 70,000 (*Islands Business*, September 1996).

Some aspects of emigration from Fiji to high-income countries have been addressed in earlier studies, for example, Bedford and



Table 1 Emigration from Fiji, 1973–97

Year	Emigrants	Per cent of total population	Year	Emigrants	Per cent of total population
1973	3,747	0.67	1986	3,048	0.43
1974	5,369	0.95	1987	5,394	0.75
1975	4,461	0.77	1988	5,695	0.79
1976	2,527	0.43	1989	5,759	0.80
1977	3,809	0.64	1990	5,849	0.80
1978	2,062	0.34	1991	5,686	0.77
1979	1,683	0.27	1992	4,783	0.63
1980	1,878	0.30	1993	4,284	0.56
1981	2,754	0.43	1994	4,317	0.55
1982	2,672	0.41	1995	5,123	0.64
1983	2,752	0.41	1996	5,190	0.67
1984	2,368	0.35	1997	4,779	0.59
1985	3,007	0.43			

Source: South Pacific Economic and Social Database, National Centre for Development Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra.

Levick (1988) and Bedford (1989). Following these two studies, an attempt was made by Gani and Ward (1995) to investigate the Fijian emigrant's decision-making process. These authors estimated a reduced form equation for migration of highly skilled and professionally trained workers to a high-income country, New Zealand, during 1987–90. The results of this study provide strong confirmation that political instability in Fiji has been a major determinant. The study also provides evidence that real income earned in New Zealand and a lagged endogenous variable were statistically significant factors.

In a further study, Gani (1998) investigated the determinants of long-term migration for emigrants (occupational as well as non-occupational migrants) to New Zealand. This analysis tested a model for migration from Fiji to New Zealand within the human capital framework for the period 1970–94. The results of this analysis provide confirmation that wage and unemployment differentials between Fiji and New Zealand

were statistically significant variables explaining permanent and long-term migration. The living standard differential between Fiji and New Zealand, and Fiji's political instability were also very important. The cost of travel, however, did not prove to be an important factor in the migrant decision making process.

However, Gani and Ward (1995) and Gani (1998) do not examine the impact of the characteristics of the migrants on migration patterns. This paper fills this gap.

Fiji's experience of emigration

Fiji has long been associated with international migration. Historically, it was a migrant-recipient country, first, with the arrival of Melanesians many hundreds of years ago followed by the arrival of European explorers and settlers between 1800 and 1850, and then the importation of Pacific island labourers in the 1860s (Lal 1992:9–10). The large-scale importation of labourers



from India by Britain, the colonial ruler at the time, to fill the gap in the supply of labour on the sugar plantations was the apotheosis of Fiji's immigration history. This system of labour importation was known as indentured emigration. This system began when the first batch of 479 indentured workers arrived from India in May 1879 and ceased in 1916, by which time approximately 70,000 indentured Indian labourers were living in Fiji (Lal 1990:Table 2.1). In return for passage and a wage, the emigrant undertook to work for the colonial government for a period of three to five years. When the working contracts expired, the worker chose either to return to India or live permanently in Fiji as a free labourer. While some returned, many chose permanent residency in Fiji, contributing to the expansion of the Fiji Indian population as well as the economy.

Although indentured emigration ceased in 1916, Fiji continued to be a migrant-recipient country in the years that followed. A new set of migrants arrived—commercial migrants from India (petty entrepreneurs, traders, shop keepers and street side vendors) and administrators for the colonial government (mostly from Britain, Australia and New Zealand). Since World War II, greater international exposure and closer economic relations with high-income countries, together with Indian migrant networks in other countries, saw a notable change in Fiji's migration patterns. Fiji became a migrant-producing country, with many Fijians—particularly those of Indian descent—seeking permanent residency in high-income countries, mainly Australia, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand.

A striking feature of post World War II migration patterns in Fiji is the dramatic rise in emigration since May 1987, when the Fijian army ousted the newly elected coalition government, which was dominated by Fiji Indians. As a consequence, political instability has prevailed with devastating effects on the economy. This can be regarded

as a relatively pure case of mass migration stemming from political developments. For example, the government's redistribution policies, prior to and following the coups, threatened Fiji Indian economic interests in land tenure, education and employment.

Selecting a destination country

Migration from low and middle-income countries to high-income countries has been the subject of several theoretical and empirical investigations. In the theoretical literature, migrants are viewed as suppliers of labour, investors in human capital, consumers of regional amenities such as public goods, and producers of commodities. Stevens (1980) and Shields and Shields (1989) provide a thorough review of the theoretical literature on migrations. The study of migration has taken several directions. For example, Bhagwati and Hamada (1974), Grimes (1981), and Brosnan and Poot (1987) focused on the impact of human capital transfer on host and destination countries, while DeVoretz and Maki (1980) and Coulson and DeVoretz (1993) investigated the values of human capital transfer. Poot, Nana and Philpott (1988) investigated migration and national government policies. Several researchers have investigated the determinants of migrant flows, for example, DeVoretz and Maki (1983), Huang (1987), Brosnan and Poot (1987), Akbar and DeVoretz (1993), Gani and Ward (1995) and Gani (1998).

The theoretical foundations of several of these studies are applicable in the Fiji case and some of these have been empirically tested, for example, in Gani and Ward (1995) and Gani (1998). While there is ample theoretical and empirical literature regarding migrants' choice of destination country, the main concern in this section is to explain preferred destination countries for Fijian migrants. Official statistics reveal that between 1977 and 1985, the United States



and Canada were the two most preferred destinations for Fijian migrants, followed by Australia and then New Zealand. In this period, 35 per cent of emigrants chose the United States and 26.2 per cent chose Canada as their destination country, 26.1 per cent chose Australia and 7.7 per cent chose New Zealand. The choice of destination country changed radically after 1987 (Table 2). Between 1987 and 1990, New Zealand became the second most preferred destination, surpassing Canada. Australia, a neighbouring country with a long history of close economic ties with Fiji, became an even more important destination for Fijian emigrants. Because of its geographic proximity and close economic ties with Fiji, most emigrants found it easy to emigrate to New Zealand in the immediate post-coup years. Emigrants' preference for New Zealand declined after 1991 and by 1993 Canada had regained its position as the second most preferred destination country.

In general, preferences for particular destination countries are dictated by a host of factors, but the destination country's immigration policy is a particularly important factor. Most destination countries have well specified migrant intake categories. Occupational migration is one category

where emigrants who meet the necessary requirements (such as formal qualifications, skills, work experience, age, and employment prospects) are allowed permanent entry. Immigration policies also make allowance for reuniting immediate family—the so-called family reunion category. Some Fijian emigrants, for example those in the 'workers not classified' occupational group in Table 5, are likely to have gained entry through this policy. It should be noted that, although destination countries revise their migration policies over time, none of the destination countries altered their policies to accommodate Fijians specifically in the post-coup period. However, the choice of destination country has not only been restricted by immigration policies, but also by other economic and social factors, for example, employment prospects, wages, quality of life, networks of family and friends and geographical proximity, are important influencing factors.

Racial composition of migrants

Before the events of 1987, Fiji Indians were the dominant emigrating racial group, accounting for just over 84 per cent of all emigrants (Table 3). This high proportion of

Table 2 Distribution of emigration from Fiji by destination country, 1986–94 (per cent)

Year	Australia	New Zealand	United States	Canada	Others
1986	40.7	9.2	26.5	32.5	2.2
1987	47.6	19.0	22.7	7.6	3.1
1988	45.3	28.8	16.5	7.0	2.4
1989	41.4	31.0	15.5	10.0	2.1
1990	40.2	20.9	19.6	17.3	1.9
1991	44.0	18.1	18.4	17.0	2.4
1992	44.0	16.1	17.0	20.5	2.4
1993	38.7	16.4	19.0	22.8	3.1
1994	34.0	15.7	23.9	22.7	3.7

Source: Fiji Bureau of Statistics. *Tourism and Migration Statistics*, Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Suva (various years).



migration by Fiji Indians in the pre-coup era is probably a result of established networks of family and friends in destination countries—a pull factor. It is also quite possible that Fiji's independence from the United Kingdom in 1970 could have had some push effects particularly in terms of the Fiji Indian community anticipating insecurity. After 1987, the proportion of Fiji Indians emigrating increased to 90 per cent of all emigrants.

The departure of Fiji Indians has had a significant impact on Fiji's population and ethnic composition. In particular, the Fiji Indian population has declined since the coups and, in 1996, remained below the 1986 level (Table 4). In 1987, Fiji Indians were the dominant ethnic group, accounting for 48 per cent of the total population, while the ethnic Fijian population accounted for 46 per cent of the total population. The ethnic Fijian population has continued to increase during the last ten years and it now accounts for approximately 51 per cent of Fiji's total population while the Fiji Indian population accounts for approximately 44 per cent. The other 5 per cent is made up of minor ethnic groups (Europeans, part-Europeans, Chinese and Rotumans).

A notable feature of Fiji's population change is that emigration has decreased the population of reproductive age in the Fiji Indian community, contributing to a reduction in the birth rate from 26.1 per 1,000 in 1986 to 21.7 per 1,000 in 1993 (see South Pacific Economic and Social Database 1996). On the other hand, the ethnic Fijian population has increased with growth rates averaging 2.3 per cent per annum during the 1987–94 period. One contributing factor has been the high birth rate among ethnic Fijians, which rose from 27.8 per 1,000 in 1986 to 29.7 per 1,000 in 1993 (6.8 per cent) (South Pacific Economic and Social Database 1996). An additional explanation for the fall in birth rate among the Fiji Indian population is that those who remained in Fiji are likely to have delayed having children during the period of political instability.

Occupational characteristics

One feature of emigration in the post 1987 period is that, on an annual average basis, approximately 42 per cent of all emigrants were occupational migrants. The emigration of Fijians with high education levels, skills

Table 3 **Fiji: emigration by ethnic group, 1986–94** (per cent)

Year	Fijian	Indian	European	Chinese	Rotuman	Part-European	Others
1986	6.3	84.4	1.6	3.0	0.8	3.2	0.7
1987	6.9	83.9	0.9	3.3	0.9	3.3	0.8
1988	4.8	87.5	0.7	2.5	0.3	3.7	0.5
1989	4.5	90.4	0.5	1.9	0.5	1.8	0.4
1990	5.4	88.8	0.5	1.6	0.8	1.9	0.9
1991	5.2	90.4	0.4	1.3	0.6	1.8	0.3
1992	5.4	90.5	0.4	1.3	0.6	1.5	0.3
1993	6.5	90.3	0.2	0.8	0.6	1.1	0.4
1994	6.1	90.2	0.2	0.8	0.6	1.8	0.4

Source: Fiji Bureau of Statistics. *Tourism and Migration Statistics*, Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Suva (various years).



Table 4 Population of Fiji, 1976–96

Census year	Ethnic Fijian	Fiji Indian	Others	Total
1976	259,932 (44.2)	292,896 (49.8)	35,420 (6.0)	588,068
1986	329,305 (46.0)	348,704 (48.7)	37,366 (5.2)	715,375
1996	394,999 (51.1)	336,579 (43.6)	41,077 (5.3)	772,655

Note: Numbers in parentheses are percentages of total population.

Source: Fiji Bureau of Statistics. *Tourism and Migration Statistics*, Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Suva (various years).

and work experience is a pure case of brain drain, and is considered to be high for a very small developing country. Data on occupational characteristics of Fiji emigrants is available by major occupational categories and some minor occupational categories (Tables 5 and 6). These data give a broad indication of occupational characteristics of emigrating Fijians.

During the period 1987–94, emigrants were predominantly from the 'professional' and 'production workers' occupational categories (Table 5). The 'production workers' category includes machine fitters and assemblers, electricians, plumbers, welders, carpenters and cabinetmakers. The second occupational category comprises professionals, technical and related workers including scientists, engineers, architects, doctors, dentists, accountants and teachers (Table 6). Among these occupations, the largest number of emigrants were teachers, followed by architects, engineers and related technicians, then accountants and finally doctors and dentists (Table 6). Emigrants from these occupations had high qualification levels and work experience and were involved in occupations which Fiji could not afford to lose. At the same time, these qualities were the most readily accepted

under the immigration requirements of the high-income countries. The loss of workers from minor occupational categories, such as engineers, technicians and medical workers, is likely to have cost Fiji dearly, because the human capital base in these areas is still very low. For example, there were 67 dentists in Fiji in 1986. This fell to 48 in 1987 and 40 in 1994 (South Pacific Economic and Social Database 1998).

Tables 5 and 6 provide official statistics on occupational characteristics as recorded by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics, the actual numbers emigrating with such characteristics are likely to be much higher. Many of those who left on a short-term basis in the initial years following Fiji's 1987 political crisis, a time when political instability was most intense, subsequently acquired permanent residency outside Fiji, and are not accounted for by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics. There is, of course, the possibility of return migration. Of the many professionals who left in the years following the coup, some may subsequently have returned because of adjustment costs, financial constraints and family members left behind. Although these factors may have triggered return migration, lack of data makes it difficult to judge the extent of this phenomenon.



Table 5 Fiji: emigration by major occupational group, 1987–94

	1987	1988	1989	1991	1992	1993	1994
Professional, technical and related workers	538	570	568	545	477	363	426
Administrative and managerial workers	219	231	220	264	235	205	190
Clerical supervisors and related workers	575	559	591	518	374	355	348
Sales workers	137	124	131	161	156	122	114
Service workers	101	81	82	105	93	108	96
Agriculture, animal husbandry, forest workers and fishermen	86	94	118	119	94	99	107
Production workers, transport equipment operators and labourers	403	492	577	641	544	506	483
Workers not classified	3,059	3,345	3,221	3,079	2,648	2,394	2,391

Note: 1990 data is not available.

Source: Fiji Bureau of Statistics. *Tourism and Migration Statistics*, Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Suva (various years).

Table 6 Fiji: emigration by minor occupational group—professional, technical and related workers, 1987–94

	Architects, engineers and related technicians	Accountants	Teachers	Medical, dental, veterinary and related workers	Total
1987	127	103	125	83	438
1988	135	97	166	86	484
1989	114	96	188	72	470
1991	127	81	173	66	447
1992	113	61	167	65	406
1993	80	62	99	60	301
1994	49	40	90	30	209

Note: 1990 data is not available.

Source: Fiji Bureau of Statistics. *Tourism and Migration Statistics*, Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Suva (various years).



Age and sex structure

The analysis of age characteristics of Fijian emigrants here is based on data for emigration to New Zealand. Generally, migrant age is dictated by the immigration policies of the recipient country. Occupational migrants are expected to be in the young working age group while the age group for non-occupational migrants, such as those migrating under business and family reunion categories, are largely in the elderly age group. The family reunion category allows parents to join their emigrant children in the destination country. According to the New Zealand data, Fijian migrant movements exhibit this general pattern, but are more concentrated in the working age group between 20 and 44 years.

One feature of Fiji's emigration pattern is that female emigrants outnumbered male emigrants during 1986–94 for all ethnic categories (Table 7). In 1986, the male–female ratio was 0.83 for ethnic Fijians, 0.84 for Fiji Indians and 0.86 for others. In 1994, the male–female ratio increased to 0.97 for ethnic Fijians, 0.96 for Fiji Indians and decreased to 0.65 for others. Although the male–female

ratio for ethnic Fijians and Fiji Indians had narrowed by 1994, the sex ratio is still in imbalance. Although published data is not available, there is anecdotal evidence that a contributing factor in this imbalance is that many females have emigrated as non-occupational migrants, particularly through marriage, and are likely to have settled in destination countries under the family reunion category.

Conclusions

Fijian emigration patterns changed dramatically in 1987. Increased numbers of Fijians have sought permanent settlement in high-income countries, and these higher emigration flows have been sustained. It is estimated that more than 70,000 Fijians, largely of Indian descent, have left Fiji permanently since the 1987 coups. Australia has been the preferred destination country, followed by Canada, the United States and New Zealand. Fiji Indians have been the main emigrant ethnic group, accounting for 84–90 per cent of all emigrants between 1986 and 1994, while emigrants of ethnic Fijian origin ranged from 4.5–7 per cent during

Table 7 Fiji: emigration by sex, 1986–94 (per cent)

	Ethnic Fijians		Fiji Indians		Others	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1986	2.9	3.5	38.5	45.9	4.2	4.9
1987	3.3	3.5	39.4	44.1	4.6	5.0
1988	2.0	2.8	43.0	44.5	3.7	4.0
1989	1.9	2.6	43.7	46.7	2.3	2.8
1990	2.1	2.7	43.5	46.9	2.2	2.6
1991	2.2	2.9	42.9	47.5	2.0	2.5
1992	2.5	2.9	43.6	46.9	1.7	2.2
1993	3.2	3.3	41.7	48.6	1.2	2.0
1994	3.0	3.1	44.2	46.0	1.5	2.3

Source: Fiji Bureau of Statistics. *Tourism and Migration Statistics*, Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Suva (various years).



1986–94. Minor ethnic groups have also emigrated in small numbers. Emigration has reduced the Fiji Indian population, which was the dominant ethnic group before 1987, to the second largest ethnic group in Fiji—they currently form 43.6 per cent of the total population while the ethnic Fijian population accounts for 51.1 per cent. As a high proportion of emigrants has been in the reproductive age group, emigration has caused birth rates among the Indian population to fall. Fijian emigrants have been of the young working age group, and largely from the production and professional workers occupations. During 1986–94, female emigrants outnumbered male emigrants and in 1994 the male–female ratio was still 0.97 for ethnic Fijians, 0.96 for Fiji Indians and 0.65 for other ethnic groups.

Fiji has attempted to resolve its political crisis by drawing up a new constitution, considered to be fair and just for all the ethnic communities, which was adopted in mid 1998. This positive development, together with a general election of the government in 1999, was expected to create confidence and lessen fears of political uncertainty for those remaining in Fiji. Unfortunately, recent events are likely to undermine what little confidence has been established by this process—long-standing fears and rivalries clearly still have a strong influence on the Fijian political process. It appears unlikely that emigration will decline significantly in the short to medium-term, but is likely to increase. A high degree of uncertainty in regard to land tenure still exists and has been compounded by developments in May 2000. Security of land has long been a major source of uncertainty for the Fiji Indian community and, unless the issue is resolved soon, will continue to be a major push factor in Fijian migration patterns. Further, a huge network of family and friends has been established between Fiji and the destination countries as a result of past emigration, and it is likely that, with these forms of closeness, many

Fijians will feel an additional desire to emigrate. Finally, skilled people will continue to emigrate from Fiji as long as destination countries have skill shortages which can be filled with Fijian talent.

References

- Akbar, S. and DeVoretz, D.J., 1993. 'Canada's demand for the third world highly trained immigrants: 1976–86', *World Development*, 21:177–87.
- Bedford, R., 1989. 'Out of Fiji: a perspective on migration after the coups', *Pacific Viewpoint*, 30:142–53.
- Bedford, R.D. and Levick, W., 1988. 'Recent migration from Fiji to New Zealand', *New Zealand Population Review*, 14:69–81.
- Bhagwati, J. and Hamada, K., 1974. 'The brain drain, integration of market of professionals and unemployment, a theoretical analysis', *Journal of Development Economics*, 1:46–57.
- Brosnan, P. and Poot, J., 1987. 'Modeling the determinants of Trans-Tasman migration after World War II', *Economic Record*, 63:313–29.
- Fiji Bureau of Statistics, (various issues). *Tourism and Migration Statistics 1993–94*, Suva.
- Coulson, R. and DeVoretz, D., 1993. 'Human capital content of Canadian immigration: 1966–1987', *Canadian Public Policy*, 14:357–66.
- DeVoretz, D.J. and Maki, D., 1983. 'The immigration of third world professionals to Canada: 1968–1973', *World Development*, 11:55–64.
- DeVoretz, D. J. and Maki, D., 1980. 'The size and distribution of human capital transfers from LDC's to Canada 1966–73', *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 28:779–800.



Fijilive.com., 16 May 2000. Available online at <http://www.fijilive.com/news>.

Gani, A., 1998. 'Some empirical evidence on the determinants of immigration from Fiji to New Zealand: 1970–94', *New Zealand Economic Papers*, 32:57–69.

Gani, A. and Ward, B.D., 1995. 'Migration of professionals from Fiji to New Zealand: a reduced form supply–demand model', *World Development*, 23:1633–37.

Grimes, A., 1981. *A Model of New Zealand Labour Market*, Research Paper 33, Reserve Bank of New Zealand, Wellington.

Huang, W-C., 1987. 'A pooled cross-section and time-series study of professional indirect immigration to the United States', *Southern Economic Journal*, 54:95–109.

Lal, B.V., 1992. *Broken Waves—A History of Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century*, University of Hawaii Press, Centre for Pacific Island Studies, Honolulu.

Lal, V., 1990. *Fiji: Coups in Paradise*, Zed Books, London.

Poot, J., Nana, G. and Philpott, B., 1988. *International Migration and the New Zealand Economy: a long-run perspective*, Institute of Policy Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington.

Shields, G.M. and Shields, M.P., 1989. 'The emergence of migration theory and suggested new direction', *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 3:277–304.

Stevens, J.B., 1980. 'The demand for public goods as a factor in the non-metropolitan migration turnaround', in D.L. Brown and J.M. Wardwell (eds), *New Directions in Urban–Rural Migration: the population turnaround in rural America*, Academic Press, New York.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to an anonymous referee for useful comments on an earlier draft.