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Contents

- The Indian Diaspora in North America: The Role of Networks
and Associations
Aditya Raj 107
- India and its Diaspora in the Arab Gulf Countries: Tapping into
Effective 'Soft Power' and Related Public Diplomacy
Rhea Abraham 124
- Trajectories of Transformation: Fiji Indians from Common Roll to
Consociationalism
Brij V Lal 147
- From Sojourners to Settlers: The Changing Role of the Indian
Diaspora in British Politics
Sunil K Choudhary 170
- The Creation of Diaspora and its Historical Significance:
A Study of Amitav Ghosh's 'Sea of Poppies'
Nandini C Sen 197
- Book Reviews 215

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Trajectories of Transformation: Fiji Indians from Common Roll to Consociationalism

Brij V Lal

The scholarship on Indian indentured migration and settlement in the far-flung 'King Sugar' colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, the Pacific Ocean, and the Indian Ocean has flourished in the last two decades or so. No longer overly pre-occupied with the grand moral questions of the 'rights and wrongs' of the system, whether indenture was slavery or not, scholars (many from the diaspora itself) have been primarily concerned to try and understand the actual lived nature of the experience, exploring questions of agency, resistance, and accommodation, and grappling with issues of cultural change and cultural persistence. These issues are important not only to scholars, but they also resonate in the daily lives of most people in the diaspora. This increased interest in the past coincides with a phenomenal growth in the consciousness of an 'Indian diaspora', facilitated through scholarship, imaginative literature, popular culture, modern technology, and the mushrooming of advocacy groups and non-governmental organisations.

This article is concerned with another, though related, question: the ways in which the different Indian communities in the former British sugar colonies evolved after the end of indenture in the early twentieth century. Anthropologists

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of an earlier generation sought to understand social and cultural change in these communities, how old institutions and practices were rejected, reformed, or refashioned to meet the exigencies of a new environment (see Kuper, 1960; Niehoff and Niehoff, 1960; Mayer, 1961; Jayawardena, 1963). Rather less comparative work was done on their political evolution. The internal dynamics in the various places in which these diasporas found themselves were often vastly different. Forbes Burnham's Guyana, for example, was different to Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam's Mauritius. The demographic situation of each country also varied: there were fewer settlers of Indian origin in Jamaica than in Trinidad, Guyana, Fiji, or Mauritius — and numbers were a significant factor in internal political dynamics. In many places, there were no indigenous communities with prior recognised rights, whereas in Fiji and Malaysia, for example, there were, with enormous consequences for the immigrant communities there. Different electoral arrangements and political alignments all played their role. Some places had proportional representation while others adhered to the 'first-past-the-post' system. Some had non-racial electoral systems, while others, such as Fiji's, were racially based. Ideology drove the politics of some countries, such as Cheddi Jagan's Guyana, while primordiality was important in many other places. Everywhere race infected the body politic in different ways, largely to the detriment of Indian communities.

In virtually every place where they settled, Indians encountered opposition and sometimes outright hostility to their claims to political equality. They struggled for recognition in the face of stiff opposition from vested interests prepared to unleash violence to maintain the status quo. In South Africa, Indians suffered the indignities of the apartheid system. In Uganda, they were summarily expelled by Idi Amin. In Malaysia, they bore the brunt of the *bhumiputra* policy (affirmative action) of the Malay rulers. In Trinidad, it was the 'Black Power' movement, and in Guyana it was Burnham's racist socialism. In Fiji, it was the wrath of indigenous militant nationalists, who deposed democratically elected governments through military coups to remain in power.

In order to understand the predicament of Indian communities, it is necessary to address a number of fundamental questions: what kind of rights and privileges were embedded in the conditions governing indenture? What kind of institutional or political set-up did indentured migrants encounter upon their arrival in the colonies? How did migrants, once freed from indenture, envision their future in their new homelands? And what kind of political culture did they seek to create? These

questions are addressed here by focusing on the political experience of Fiji Indians in the twentieth century. Fiji is an interesting case study, not least because, after more than a century, the question of what rights and privileges immigrant communities should enjoy is still a matter of intense public debate with no clear resolution in sight (Fraenkel, Firth and Lal, 2009). Fiji was the last major importer of Indian indentured labour, and it may be the last to put to rest the ghosts of the past. The subject of political rights inevitably raises other issues about identity, belonging, attachment, and citizenship that resonate in the experience of other multicultural societies in both the developing and the developed world.

In the Beginning

During the first phase of indentured migration from the 1830s to the 1870s, the 'political rights' of Indian indentured migrants were of secondary concern to policy-makers (see Gillion, 1962; Tinker, 1974). Of more concern was the process and infrastructure of recruitment and shipment, and conditions on plantations. Pertinent questions were asked about fraudulent conduct in the recruitment of labour, conditions aboard the ships transporting indentured migrants, breaches of the penal code on plantations, allegations of violence and abuse, and the diligence (or lack of it) with which colonial authorities treated these matters. Little was said about migrants who chose not to return to India but instead settled in the colonies: what precise legal rights of residence did these migrants have? The planters and colonial governments, no doubt, wanted to keep Indians in the colonies permanently as a dependable pool of cheap and readily available labour. Perhaps the question of 'rights' did not arise because there was no other clearly identifiable group with claims to prior rights with whom these might have had to be negotiated. In fact, everyone was an immigrant with (theoretically) equal rights of residence and citizenship.

The issue of 'rights' was raised tangentially at the beginning of the second phase of indentured emigration from India in the 1870s as a result of complaints by the West India Committee, representing West Indian planters, to the Imperial Government about undue hindrance in the recruitment of labour in India. Lord Salisbury, Secretary of State for India, wrote to the Government of India in 1875 impressing upon it the benefit both to India and to the colonies of encouraging emigration 'to colonies well suited for an Indian population'. In return, London promised that (Gillion, 1962, 26):

... as an indispensable condition of the proposed arrangements, ... the colonial laws and their administration will be such that Indian settlers who have completed their terms of service to which they agreed, ... [in] return for the expense of bringing them to the colonies, will be in all respects free men, with privileges no whit inferior to those of any other class of Her Majesty's subjects resident in the colonies.

However, Salisbury's Despatch did not bear fruit. The provincial governments (principally Bengal and Madras) refused to intervene for fear of being tainted by too close an association with a trade that was unpopular with the masses. Technically, therefore, the 'Despatch' became a dead letter with no status and no binding obligations, although the spirit of equality which underpinned it was never repudiated by the Imperial or Colonial governments. On the contrary, in the case of Fiji, at least, it was continuously reaffirmed whenever the question of emigration arose (Lal, 1997).

During the period of indenture the political status of Indian settlers was never raised as an issue. No thought was given to what rights these immigrants might be entitled to as free settlers. Perhaps it was thought that Indian immigrants would always remain members of the labouring class with few rights. Fiji's Governor, Sir John Thurston, said in response to a query about the future of Indian immigrants in Fiji in 1888 (Gillion, 1962, 215):

As to the future position of those Indians who may settle in the country, it is this: they will either settle in towns like Suva or Levuka, as house servants, or as gardeners, masons, road-makers, petty shopkeepers, and so on; or they will rent land and settle in the country — out of towns. In this case, they will probably live together in communities under control of the government, like other people. They will pay rent, taxes, licenses, and other things, as other people do. There will be headmen over them, and officers appointed from among them, who will be responsible for keeping order — and those headmen and officers will be paid by their community.

In short, Indian immigrants were to be beasts of burden, little more. In administrative matters, they were supervised by the office of the Agent-General of Immigration (in some places called the Protector of Immigrants). The effectiveness of this office varied, depending upon the energy and integrity of the incumbent officer, the vicissitudes of the economy, and the willingness and ability of the colonial officialdom to enforce the colony's labour legislation (Lal, 2000).

In 1912, Fiji Indian leaders wrote to Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa to seek his assistance in getting an Indian lawyer to come to Fiji. That lawyer came in the person of Manilal Maganlal Doctor who soon established himself as an effective leader of the community and its intermediary with the outside world (Lal, 1992; Ramsurrun and Ramsurrun-Nunkoo, 2007). Unsurprisingly, Manilal became a thorn in the flesh of the Colonial government through his persistent attacks on colonial policy and petty discrimination against Indians. In retaliation, the government sought to marginalise him. This it achieved in 1917 when it nominated a wealthy but illiterate Indian planter, Badri Maharaj, as the sole Indian member to the Legislative Council. In 1920, Manilal was forced to leave Fiji for his role in the industrial dispute of that year, after he was barred from practising law in areas of Indian settlement. However, by then the indenture system had ended, and with it began a new era in the Indian struggle for political representation. Two principles underpinned the Indo-Fijian struggle: equal franchise with other population groups in the colony and a common roll — here 'common roll' means a non-racial, 'common voters' roll', although this terminology was never used, as such, in the island. This was a fraught struggle, however, ultimately doomed to failure in the face of entrenched interests in Fiji (Gillion, 1977).

The immediate problem facing the Fijian government in 1920, upon the abolition of all existing indenture contracts, was an acute shortage of labour. Hoping to attract some 10,000 Indian settlers to Fiji, preferably as family units, the government promised a much reformed and closely supervised system led by 'men of good character who have actually worked in Fiji'. In order to facilitate the deal, the government of Fiji undertook to draft an ordinance giving a general guarantee that Indians resident in Fiji would enjoy rights and privileges 'equal to the position of other British subjects resident within the colony'. However, an Indian government deputation to Fiji, headed by Venkatpatiraju Garu, issued a damning report outlining the grievances of the Indian community, the prevalent racial and other discrimination against them, and the propensity of the Colonial government to regard Indians as little more than 'an alien labour corps' (Lal-2, 1998). Nonetheless, the Fijian government agreed in principle to grant limited communal franchise to Indian settlers.

The government of India rejected communal franchise and demanded equal political representation for the Indian community. Fiji's response predictably focused on the government's commitment to indigenous Fijians under 'promises' given in

the 'Deed of Cession', by which Fiji had become a British Crown Colony. That document was used as a brake on any political development the Colonial government did not itself authorise. The Indian government accepted that Fijian (Lal-2, 1998, 275):

... interests must be maintained, and has no desire to question this. But the elective representation on the Legislative Council ... enjoyed by the European community is presumably regarded as not inconsistent with the terms of the Deed of Cession, and it can hardly be argued that the grant of a similar status to their Indian fellow subjects would infringe those terms.

The retention of a communal franchise in colonies where Indians were not a minority was 'regarded in India as a system which is intended to assign an inferior status to Indians as compared with their British fellow subjects, and to limit their political influence in the colony'. However, if Fiji still insisted on retaining the communal system of voting, then equal representation should be given to Indians and Europeans. The Colonies Committee argued that:

the importance of the Indian community is not adequately represented by the number of seats which it is proposed to allot to them [three], and ... no measure which does not accord to the Indian community, on a communal basis, representation in the Legislative Council at least numerically equal to that already accorded to the non-official European community can be regarded as consistent with the principle of equality of status.

That would be a breach of the very undertaking the government of Fiji was prepared to make in return for the resumption of Indian immigration to Fiji.

India's protestations were ignored, however. Supporting Fiji, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Leo S Amery, rejected a common voters' roll in favour of a communal voters' roll (Lal-2, 1998, 280-281). 'The position of the British government in Fiji is governed by the Deed of Cession by the Fijian Chiefs under which Her Majesty's government undertook certain responsibilities of trusteeship', he argued, 'the discharge of which forms the first obligation of the government in all matters relating to the colony and its administration'. The special circumstances of Fiji (by which he meant the colony's compartmentalised multiracial character) could not be ignored. Nor was the Colonial Office prepared to grant equality of representation to Indians. All it was prepared to sanction was three seats, through communal elections, which it regarded as 'affording adequate representation' to the

community. The new Legislative Council thus provided for six elected European members, three elected Indian members, and three indigenous Fijians appointed by the Governor.

The rejection of a common voters' roll was unpopular not only with the Indian leaders in Fiji but also with other overseas Indian communities, such as Indians in Kenya who stood firm in support of a common voters' roll. Henry S L Polak, who was with Gandhi in South Africa and in 1929 was the London-based Secretary of the Indian Overseas Association, argued against the acceptance of a communal voters' roll 'under a misapprehension of fact, or a misunderstanding of principle', which was 'fraught with so much peril to Indian welfare and dignity' (Gillion, 1977, 133). The common voters' roll campaign in Fiji was initially masterminded by Shivabhai B Patel, who had come to Fiji in 1928 at the behest of Mahatma Gandhi to help organise the Indian community there and who remained the community's intermediary to the outside world for over 40 years. The following year, he was joined by another London-trained Gujarati lawyer, Ambalal D Patel (better known as A D Patel), who soon became the leading spokesman for a common voters' roll and emerging as the greatest leader of the Indian community in colonial Fiji until his death in 1969 (Lal, 1997). Shivabhai Patel wrote to Polak (Lal, 1992, 91-92):

We do not wish or desire to dominate. We do not want to see the Fijian suffer. His interest in the colony is paramount and we want to maintain it and help him towards the achievement of the elective principle in place of nomination. We do not want to predominate. We do not want any special or lower franchise qualifications. All we want is the recognition of the principle of common and equal rights. We should not mind if we had only 100 Indian voters, provided we had a common franchise. We should not even mind if a European represented us, so long as he was elected on a common ticket. If the common franchise were [sic] created there would not be much among the races in the political field and we should be pulling together for the good and welfare of Fiji as a whole, instead of pulling against each other.

In the first sitting of the Legislative Council in 1929, Vishnu Deo, one of the three newly elected members, moved that the political rights and status granted to Indians along racial lines were unacceptable to them, and that they should instead be granted equal political rights with other British subjects resident in Fiji. All the arguments

supporting a common voters' roll were repeated. A predictable response came from the European members, belittling the Indian community and denigrating its humble origins, its 'self-evident' unpreparedness to shoulder the sober responsibilities of government, and the responsibility of the 'British race' to safeguard the Fijians and the spirit of the 'Deed of Cession'.

Upon defeat of the motion, Indian members staged a boycott of the Legislative Council. The Indian leaders did not realistically expect their motion to pass: European adamance and the Colonial government's reluctance were already on record. However, they took a stand in principle. Mahatma Gandhi cabled his congratulations to the Indian members for their 'patriotic spirit', while Henry Polak wrote that the Fiji case had shown that Indians throughout the Empire were not 'parties to separate electorates, but that, on the contrary, everywhere they stand by the principle of [a] common franchise as [the] symbol of equal franchise'. In Fiji itself, Indian leaders continued their struggle. On 28 December 1929, they wrote to Governor Sir Murchison Fletcher (Lal, 2011, 5):

The claim for [a] common franchise is a matter of principle to us and is based upon a sincere and earnest desire of the Indian community to work in amity and harmony with other sister communities living in the colony. We are of the opinion that franchise on [a] communal basis is bad in principle and harmful in working, and it tends to perpetuate the racial distinctions and bickering so much evident today in the colony. Again, the present franchise denotes to our minds an inferiority of political status which is not consonant with the pledges and deliberations made on high and solemn authority regarding the equal political status, rights and privileges ... [of] Indian British subjects domiciled in various Crown colonies.

In this plea, echoes of the Salisbury Despatch could be heard. For his part, not content to only reject a common voters' roll, Fletcher advocated the abolition of the elective system altogether and its replacement by nomination. He had the support of some Indians close to the government and beneficiaries of its patronage, and some Muslim leaders who feared being marginalised in a predominantly Hindu electorate. They wanted separate Muslim representation on the grounds that they were separate and quite different from the broader Indian community by virtue of their distinct culture and religion. The demand, opportunistically supported by Europeans who sought to weaken the Indian community by fostering division within it, would continue to be raised without success throughout the twentieth century (Ali,

1980). Indian leaders rejected Fletcher's nomination proposal; they wrote to the governor on 5 March 1935 (Lal, 2011, 6):

We have reached a stage in this colony where the introduction of a system of nomination will be like ... [pouring] new wine in old bottles. Such an anti-democratic and retrogressive step will ... [cause] strong reaction from an overwhelming majority of the community, which will result, in our opinion, in endangering [the] peace and harmony that at present exist between different races and creeds in the colony.

The Indian government also stood firm against the proposal and the matter was dropped.

The issue soon resurfaced, however. The 'Letters Patent' of 1937 introduced parity among the three principal communities: each was allocated five members in the Legislative Council (three European and three Indian members elected on a communal franchise, and two each nominated by the Governor), while all five Fijian members were chosen from a panel nominated by the Great Council of Chiefs. As a matter of convention, one of the Indian nominated members was always a Muslim. There the matter rested for nearly 30 years until new 'Letters Patent' arrived in 1963 (Ali, 1980). So, was the struggle for a common voters' roll 'counterproductive' as Ahmed Ali has argued, and as the Europeans and indigenous Fijians also did at the time? 'The reaction [of the communities, other than the Indian] was to seek constitutional retrogression as a protective device in order to prevent [a] common franchise for all time', Ali (1980, 140) wrote; and he continued:

Indian strategy proved disastrous It alienated and increased the isolation of the community. And it hindered the amelioration of some of their genuine grievances, as in education, and secure tenure for their land leases. It, moreover, split the Indian community permanently; Muslims, for instance, began to clamour for separate political representation and almost succeeded in obtaining it.

Several questions arise: would the aspirations of the Indian community in fields such as education and land leases have been 'ameliorated' if its leaders had not demanded a common voters' roll? How would a single, separate seat for Muslims (which was what was being demanded and was on offer) help the cause of either Muslims or the Indian community more generally? How would the

racial compartmentalisation of the three communities contribute to nation-building with an overarching, enlarged sense of common citizenship? And would a European-Fijian coalition, preceding the demand for a common voters' roll, not flow from it? In the end, Indian leaders took a principled stand against a policy that was both short-sighted and counterproductive to the larger interests of the colony as a whole. The Colonial government's criticism of the Indian position was not surprising: it was part of its arsenal of demonising its critics. The result of opposition to any concession to a non-racial political system was the steady entrenchment of 'race' in the fabric of Fiji's public life.

Towards Independence

By the early 1960s, Harold MacMillan's 'winds of change' were beginning to reach the Pacific islands. The question now was not if but when Fiji would become independent and how (Lal, 2006). All the old debates about a common voters' roll and communal voters' rolls resurfaced, now with added urgency pregnant with real political consequences. A D Patel entered the political fray in 1963 after a decade in the political wilderness, while the Fijian side saw the emergence of Ratu Kamisese Mara, Oxford-educated successor to his illustrious uncle, the redoubtable Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, who died in 1959. Patel and Mara, poles apart in their thinking about the appropriate direction of political development in Fiji, would dominate the island's decade-long period of decolonisation (see Mara, 1997; Scarr, 2009).

The anxiety of the indigenous Fijians was palpable; they lagged behind the other communities in virtually every field: education, commerce, commercial agriculture, and the professions. This was in large part the result of the vision and policies of their own leaders, determined to maintain the status quo. In 1944, Ratu Sukuna, as the Secretary for Fijian Affairs and thus the chief advisor to the government on matters Fijian, reorganised a separate system of Fijian administration, not to enable his people to cope with the forces of change which were sweeping Fiji in the post-World War II years, but to revert to its conservative, traditional moorings, putting the chiefs in charge once again, however ill-equipped they might be to provide appropriate leadership, thus building walls against the encroaching forces of modernity (see Spate, 1959; Belshaw, 1964; Watters, 1969). Large numbers of Fijian men were fighting the Chinese communists in the jungles of Malaya in the 1950s, instead of improving living conditions in the villages. For their loyalty and courage they received praise but little else. Many independent observers

drew attention to the smothering effects of a social system, out of kilter with the times, stifling individual initiative and the enterprise of ordinary Fijians, but to little avail. Matters were not helped by the industry and drive of Indo-Fijians. Their numbers had, for the first time, exceeded that of native Fijians in the late 1940s, and fears of 'Indian dominance', whispers of which had been heard in the 1930s, intensified. The ever-present fear of a menacing external threat from a community making steady progress doubled Fijian fears. A siege mentality set in.

In this atmosphere, any talk of constitutional change towards more internal self-government was viewed by Fijians (and Europeans) with alarm, as a betrayal of the oft-repeated promises of the 'Deed of Cession'. Independence was firmly rejected, with the Fijian chiefs insisting that Fiji was an 'integral' part of the UK and that 'the possibility of severance of this link with the Crown — a link forged in a spirit of mutual trust and goodwill — should never be contemplated'. However, if change was to come, it had to be on Fijian terms, at their initiative, at a time of their choosing. It was Fijian chiefs who had ceded Fiji to the UK and the colony should therefore be returned to them, they argued. Fijian leaders demanded that certain preconditions be met before they would contemplate further constitutional change. These included guarantees on the ownership of Fijian lands, the retention of all legislation pertaining to Fijian rights and interests (with the Council of Chiefs having veto power over them), an assurance of parity between the races in the civil service, and the acceptance of Fiji as a Christian state (Lal, 1992, 189).

Indian leaders did not question the ownership of Fijian land (the terms and conditions of leasing land was another matter) nor the place and role of Fijian social and cultural institutions. However, they differed profoundly with the benign view Fijians had of British colonialism in Fiji and of colonialism in general. Ratu Mara told the London Constitutional Conference in London in July 1965 that he and his people 'have never found any sound or valid reason to attenuate, let alone abandon, our historical and happy association with the United Kingdom', an association 'forged in a spirit of mutual trust and abiding loyalty', which had 'bred an enduring faith and loyalty in the British Crown and in British institutions' (see Lal, 2006, 240–244). A D Patel, the leader of the Indian delegation, wanted a new constitution that would:

... lead our country ultimately to complete independence in the not-too-distant future Political liberty, equality and fraternity rank foremost

among the good things of life and mankind all over the world cherishes and holds these ideals close to its heart. The people of Fiji are no exception.

He continued to say that colonialism, held by Fijians and Europeans in such high regard, was 'a form of government which stands universally condemned in the modern world'. Condemned it might be, but not in the minds of the non-Indian participants at the conference, nor of the Colonial Office.

Patel argued against a communal voters' roll as it stood for divided loyalties: 'it inhibited the growth of [a] national consciousness among the people, and was generally identified with religious fanaticism, or racial separatism, or economic or social privilege' (Lal, 1997, 192). It could derail the successful operation of parliamentary democracy as elected representatives could not afford to subordinate the interests and prejudices of their particular sub-communities to the overarching interests of the larger community. A communal voters' roll tended to magnify communal differences, encouraging new communities to also seek separate representation. Communal voters' rolls had been abandoned in most countries, and 'universally condemned as a system of election in all democratic countries'. It was time to jettison a failed past:

We believe that the time has come that the different communities living in Fiji should become a nation. We suggest that the future Constitution should make provision for free elections based on universal adult suffrage, on the principle of one man, one vote, one value, to create true representative political institutions to govern Fiji.

To that end, 'every effort should be made to ensure that the peoples of Fiji are actively encouraged to form and organise political parties along national lines, so that in due course the different communities living in Fiji are politically integrated' (see Lal, 1997, 191–192).

Predictably, there was resistance from indigenous Fijians and Europeans to a common voters' roll in any shape or form; and the UK government, while appreciating the intellectual merit of non-racialism, was reluctant to push Fijians and Europeans towards accepting it. The British government's thinking was hugely influenced by a confidential memorandum which Julian Amery, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, had written in 1960 after a fleeting visit to Fiji. He wrote that Fijians and Indians 'are more distinct as communities than Jews and Arabs in Palestine, Greeks and Turks in Cyprus, or even Europeans and Bantu

in South and Central Africa'. Under these circumstances, it was important to 'accept that it is impracticable to think in terms of a single Fijian nation or a common [voters'] roll, at any rate for the foreseeable future'. Indeed, Amery went on to recommend separate racially based institutions for the different communities. Fijian sensitivities could not be disregarded; they were the 'loyal community', they dominated the armed forces of the colony and the UK could not hope to rule the country against their wishes. Amery concluded that 'to exorcise the fear of communal domination is to make it clear "as of now" that we stand for equal rights for both communities as communities, and that we shall not pull out until both ask us to do [so]' (see Lal, 2006, 37–39).

There were murmurings in the Colonial Office about the stark choices that Amery recommended which went against the grain of official thinking leaning in the direction of non-racial democracy but, overall, the advice was accepted. As time went by, it became clear that what the UK wanted was an outcome that had a semblance of democracy about it, but which left indigenous Fijians firmly in control. It devoted its energies towards ensuring that outcome.

Fijian Fears of a Common Voters' Roll

Fijian suspicion of a common voters' roll was influenced by many factors. (The discussion that follows is based on unpublished constitutional documents prepared for independence negotiations and in the present author's possession.) A century of enforced separation played their part, as did a disturbing sense of lagging behind in the economic and commercial sectors. There was the fear of 'Indian domination' which a common voters' roll might bring about. As independence approached, Fijian leaders for the first time put their thoughts on paper about a common voters' roll and communal voters' rolls, and it is worth revisiting them at length. Fiji was a Fijian country, just as India was for Indians and England for the English, Fijians argued:

In their respective countries, the average Englishman and the average Indian have every reason to react against any attempt to threaten their positions It is within this context that the reactions of the Fijian community against the Indians' demand for [an] equal share in the country's political life ought to be viewed and weighed.

Fijians feared that in a 'truly national society, their special identity would become politically irrelevant'. This possible diminishment was totally unacceptable: '...

Fijians would resent such [a] development in their own country'. They did not want to watch from the side lines, seeing their status 'falling from that of a nation to that of a mere community wherein they would have to take their place along the others'. The Malays had shown what could happen if people were pushed to the wall. 'The gravity of this development ... should not be underestimated'.

There was also the fear of 'losing ground', and a growing resentment revolving around it. Fijians increasingly felt 'the impact of the numerical and economic strength of the non-indigenous [peoples]'. The Fijian felt threatened:

... in fact, the developments that have emerged ... have only added to his economic, social and political insecurity in his own country. As others move forward, he and his lot fall behind. As the others consolidate their newly acquired positions in his country, he finds that he is steadfastly losing ground.

Thus, Indians were part of the problem in the Fijian's mind: he doubted their loyalty, and granting them equal political rights as implied in a common voters' roll would be a 'political risk of the first magnitude'. The Indian demand for political equality and, therefore, greater political power was seen by Fijians 'as an effort to push [their] community into the background'.

Clearly, there were also broader forces of change which were disadvantaging indigenous Fijians and causing a deep sense of anxiety:

Urbanisation and the growth of a complex economy are causing drift into ... [a] new world where they find that theirs is essentially a subordinate role. Their participation in the process of development and modernisation is characterised by a growing political and economic dependence, something completely alien to the free, less rigorous, and somewhat more independent approach afforded by their traditional economy.

However, all the old buffers, such as a separate system of Fijian administration which protected their special status, were on their way out. Fijians used to be 'poor men in a poor country; now they are poor men in a relatively rich country'. If Fijian sensitivities were not heeded, a rising tide of Fijian nationalism could create a 'disturbing development in terms of national unity'. Disturbing questions, indeed, but no one asked how this state of affairs was allowed to come to pass.

This, then, was the broad background which informed the thinking of Fijian leaders towards the proposal for a common voters' roll. One group, indigenous

Fijians, thought they were the nation whose patrimony they refused to share with other communities, except on their own terms; while the other, the Indo-Fijians, took it as a given that they were already part of that 'Fiji nation', and all that they were doing was seeking a place of honour and equality within it. A common voters' roll, in the Fijian view, was a recipe for disaster. Unrestrained and unfettered competition between the two groups for power at the ballot box would quite possibly lead to racial conflagration, making future political co-operation and inter-ethnic accommodation more difficult. There were lessons to be learned from the racial riots in Malaysia. Fijians were not opposed to a common voters' roll per se, but they rejected its immediate introduction. As a long-term goal it was fine, as Heaven was for Christians, as Ratu Mara quipped, something he would contemplate after he had completed his political career.

Certain preconditions had to be met before a common voters' roll could be considered, such as more multiracial schools (which was opposed by Fijians who argued that their children would 'lose' their cultural moorings in multiracial schools), increased communication through a common language, 'integrative participation of ethnic groups in economic and social activities', and bridging the gap in educational and professional fields. 'Conditions for inter-communal tolerance and understanding need to be first cultivated if [a] common [voters'] roll is to effect [a] minimum [of] group conflicts, thus allowing conditions favourable for accommodation of conflicting communal standpoints [to develop]'. Communal voters' rolls were better suited to societies 'where the sensitivity of group differences and group conflicts is high Rather than bringing these groups [in]to direct confrontation, communal [voters'] rolls and cross-voting provide a cushioning effect, hence minimising the subsequent tensions and conflicts within the political system'. Space would thus be allowed for the forces of democratisation to take root unhindered by disturbances, which were the bane of many newly independent states as one group or another sought to impose its will and power on the people through the 'tyranny of the majority'. Communal voters' rolls would ensure the representation in the political sphere of all major ethnic groups.

The assumptions upon which Fijians argued their case were critiqued by their political opponents: were all Fijians of one view on things political? Was homogeneity of social structure and outlook a necessary precondition for democracy and a common voters' roll? Was there any country in the world which had a homogenous social structure, which was not ethnically plural? Did the protection of minority

groups necessarily require separate political representation? Was not the individual the ultimate minority? How could Indians, unevenly scattered across the country, a tiny minority in many areas and a dominant majority only in the sugarcane belt, dominate when elections would be contested on a constituency basis? However, in the end it was the Fijian view which prevailed. The tireless advocate of a common voters' roll A D Patel died on the eve of independence and his successor Siddiq M Koya was not as committed to a common voters' roll as his former leader. Indian leaders conceded ground on virtually every contentious issue in an effort to have a smooth transition to independence in 1969, Koya telling clearly relieved officials from the Colonial Office that he, too, was prepared to regard a common voters' roll as a long-term goal. Fijian adamance with solid European backing won the day (Lal, 2006, xxiv).

Independence and Beyond

The 1970 Independence Constitution entrenched an enlarged version of the 1966 Constitution, the very same document that Indian leaders had boycotted. In the Lower House of 52 seats, 12 Fijian, 12 Indo-Fijian, and 5 'general elector' seats were to be contested on racial (that is, communal voters' rolls); and 10 each for Fijians and Indo-Fijians, and 3 for general electors for 'national' cross-voting seats, where the ethnicity of the candidate was specified but not that of the voters. Fijians saw this as an important advance towards political integration, a view rejected by Indian leaders who argued that it would perpetuate the existing communal system of voting and obstruct the introduction of a common voters' roll in future. 'It will magnify communal differences and inevitably harden the attitude of all races (including the majority race) along communal lines', with the result that 'political parties will not be able to obtain the candidature of a true representative of any particular race, let alone obtain a majority of seats in the legislature to form a workable government' (Lal, 2006, 245). This is what, in actual fact, transpired in post-colonial Fiji.

The essence of the electoral system was racial, and the real prize was the capture of communal seats. The system provided all the incentives to appeal to the sensitivities of one's own ethnic community, at the expense of the broader national interest. The route to success lay in consolidating your own ethnic base, while hoping to divide enough of your opponents' to win power. Simply put, the system encouraged the politics of 'divide and rule'; and it was a game the Fijians played better than their

opponents. There was less splintering of votes among them because traditional leaders held sway, and because they had the solid support of the general electors. Indians were more divided: in 1972, nearly a quarter of Indians voted for the Alliance Party rather than the Indo-Fijian-based National Federation Party (Ali, 1973). However, with the passage of time, as the politics of ethnicity became embedded, that trend vanished. Racial polarisation at the polls increased, and this was the inevitable consequence of the electoral system. A government elected into office principally by Fijian votes necessarily had to attend to the needs and concerns of the indigenous Fijian community first. Pro-Fijian policies designed to redress their disproportionately low numbers in the fields of higher education and the higher echelons of the public service and commerce — all legacies of colonial rule, as well as the myopic vision of some Fijian leaders — grated with Indo-Fijians, themselves marginalised in many areas, who felt isolated and neglected by a government, as they saw it, by Fijians, of Fijians, for Fijians. Their increasing disenchantment only deepened the chasm.

Fiji achieved its independence peacefully, but it was a fragile, illusory peace, for none of the deep underlying issues about the structure of power-sharing were resolved. The two sides of the political spectrum held contradictory views on what the nature and purpose of democracy in Fiji was. Indian leaders hoped that having allayed Fijian fears by making significant concessions in the constitutional negotiations on independence, and by providing Fijian chiefs the power of veto in the Upper House over all legislation pertaining to Fijian interests and concerns, they would enjoy the free play of democratic politics, compete freely for power at the ballot box, and form a government if they won. Fijians had a different conception of what independence entailed for them. The paraphernalia of democracy was fine as long as it ensured an 'acceptable' outcome: Fijian victory at the polls. Whenever the Fijian hold on power was challenged, violence was threatened, as in 1968 and in 1982 and, finally, unleashed in 1987 through a military coup when the Alliance Party was toppled by a Fiji Labour Party-National Federation Party coalition (Lal, 1988; Scarr, 1988). Prime Minister Mara often said that 'race is a fact of life', though in truth it was one fact among many others. Nonetheless, public memory came to be racially archived and public policy constructed around it, whether it was affirmative action in the public service, or the allocation of scholarships and opportunities for further training, or the location of development projects (Lal, 2010). Discrimination was justified on the grounds that a manifestly

disadvantaged community was being helped, but the assumption that one group was disadvantaged and in need of special assistance and the other was not, was not supported by independently verified evidence. The politics of race became the order of the day.

Reference has been made here of Fijians and Indians as homogenous communities with unified interests. This was patently not the case (Taylor, 1987). Each community was divided by class, regional and social interests even though this might not have been visible in the public arena. Among Fijians there were murmurings about the dominance in Fijian and national affairs of certain provinces, of Paramount Chiefs divorced from the realities of the everyday lives of most ordinary Fijians buffeted by growing unemployment, the rising cost of living, urban drift, and deepening poverty. Among Indo-Fijians there were disparities between the rich business and professional classes and the rural poor. Destitution and deprivation were no respecters of ethnic boundaries, and this was beginning to forge a broad coalition of interests between the two communities based on class rather than race. The realities on the ground were changing rapidly, but the political architecture of the country remained firmly based on race, in which an aging Fijian élite held sway, whose lifestyle was based on privilege and exclusion, who were therefore resistant to change they themselves did not approve of, and who were determined to remain in harness until the end. Chiefs were born to rule just as their people were destined to run the country. The 1987 coup was widely portrayed as a racial clash between indigenous Fijians and Indians, though in truth it was more about carefully camouflaged class interests and personal ambitions. It was about turning the Fijian clock backwards.

This was most clearly evident in the post-coup 1990 Constitution which sought to entrench total Fijian control of political power. The electoral system was now completely race-based. Fijians had more seats in parliament than Indo-Fijians (39 to 27), even though Indians constituted nearly half of the total population. Rural Fijians were disproportionately over-represented over their urban counterparts, thought to be suspect in their loyalty to tradition and custom. The posts of Governor-General, Prime Minister, Chief Justice, the Chairman of the Public Service Commission, and the Chairman of the Police Services Commission, among other offices, were reserved for indigenous Fijians. The consultative provisions of the 1970 Constitution, requiring the Prime Minister to consult the Leader of the Opposition, were abolished. And the Constitution gave explicit direction to the

government to promote 'positive discrimination' in favour of Fijians and Rotumans (inhabitants of a small Fijian island dependency), without accountability to anyone. The intention was to exclude Indo-Fijians from having any voice in the governance of the country. And it was hoped that all these pro-Fijian measures would preserve Fijian unity to ensure that power remained in Fijian hands. This hope proved to be in vain (Lal-1, 1998).

The politics of racial exclusivism was taking its toll on everyone, including indigenous Fijians. Yet, Fijian political leaders continued to insist on separate racial representation and they wanted the fullest retention of the 1990 Constitution. Meanwhile, Indo-Fijian leaders rejected the Constitution and the racially discriminatory premises which underpinned it. However, they were confronted by a Fijian leadership insistent on keeping political leadership in Fijian hands. The lesson of the post-independence period was clear. The Westminster style of 'winner-takes-all' democracy had excluded them from power. The idea of separate racial representation had become deeply rooted in the Fijian psyche. Thus, race as a fact of life could not be ignored, or ignored at the Indian community's peril. Also, not all Indo-Fijians were of one mind on this. The Fiji Labour Party, rhetorically non-racial but supported principally by Indo-Fijians, continued to insist on non-racial politics, but its leaders were well aware of the actual realities of politics on the ground.

It was in this fraught context that the Report of the Fiji Constitution Review Commission was issued (Reeves, Vakatura and Lal, 1996). The Commission was appointed in 1995 with bi-partisan parliamentary support to review the lop-sided 1990 Constitution and to recommend constitutional arrangements which were better suited to the particular political and cultural realities of a multicultural Fiji, which recognised the rights, interests, and concerns of the indigenous Fijian community, but also paid due heed to the rights and aspirations of other communities living in Fiji. The Commission's principal recommendation was for Fiji to move away from racial to more open, non-racial politics within the overarching conventions of a Westminster-style democracy. Of the 71 seats in Parliament, the Commission recommended that 46 seats be contested on an open, common voters' roll, and the remaining 25 seats on a racially reserved basis — the latter only for a limited period of time as a transitory measure to complete non-racialism. The 'alternative vote' the Commission recommended was intended to encourage the formation of multiracial (pre-election) coalitions that would hopefully dilute the element of

racial tension characteristic of Fiji's general elections, and encourage the trading of preferences among like-minded moderate parties.

The 'common voters' roll'-approach recommended by the Commission was rejected by the Parliamentary Select Committee considering its report. An important part of the reason was the steadfast determination of indigenous Fijians not to jettison the racial voting system of the 1990 Constitution which had given them an outright majority in Parliament and an illusion of power. However, there was also resistance from the Indo-Fijian side, apprehensive, and with good reason, about the vagaries of electoral politics. They wanted guaranteed representation in Parliament and, further, guaranteed power-sharing embedded in the Constitution itself. For them, the most crucial problem was not the electoral system, but the exclusion of Indo-Fijians from power for much of the twentieth century. The Parliamentary Select Committee decided not to reject a common voters' roll altogether but to reverse the order recommended by the Commission: that is, 25 of the 72 seats would be contested on an open, or common voters' roll, and 46 seats on a racially reserved basis: 25 for Fijians, 19 for Indo-Fijians, 3 for general electors, and 1 for Rotumans. The different communities would have the power of veto over any attempt to alter the allocation of seats. The intention, in other words, was to entrench communal seats permanently. Further, the Constitution stipulated that any political party with more than 10 percent of seats in Parliament would be automatically entitled to be invited to participate in Cabinet in proportion to the number of seats it held in the Lower House. Since it was assumed, not unreasonably under the circumstances and in view of the country's electoral history, that political parties in Fiji would continue to be racially based, this would in effect mean constitutionally mandated power-sharing among the two major communities. This was a historic achievement. Moreover, a strong Bill of Rights protected individual freedoms, and the independence of the judiciary was guaranteed. Mechanisms were put in place to enhance consultative, non-confrontational processes of decision-making. And there was provision that public resources should be allocated broadly in accordance with the size of the different communities.

Conclusion

Indo-Fijian leaders finally realised that open, unrestrained competition for power had been futile for their people, and deeply resented by indigenous Fijians. Nevertheless, Indo-Fijians had deep anxieties about the future: the leases for land on

which they cultivated their crops were expiring, with no guarantee of renewal; more and more of them were drifting to the mushrooming squatter settlements on the fringes of urban areas; many were staring at a proverbial ceiling in the civil service; and they numbered next to nothing in the military, which had inflicted several coups on the country. Thus, consociationalism allowed for an honourable way out of these and other dilemmas, allowing the different communities to share power in proportion to their numbers in Parliament.

The demographic situation had also changed. Indigenous Fijians were no longer a minority community, which had been the cause of so much political turmoil in Fiji. Now an outright majority, Fijians no longer feared 'Indian domination'. And they knew that in any power-sharing arrangement, they would not come out second best. The Indo-Fijian population, nearly half the total population at the time of the 1987 coup, had declined substantially through emigration and a lower birth rate, now constituting only some 37 percent of the population. Entrenched racially reserved seats gave them guaranteed representation in Parliament and a place at the table of government, as of right rather than as a matter of grace, living on the sufferance of others. The convergence of two once mutually incompatible interests had produced an outcome that had only a few years ago seemed totally out of reach, an unrealisable dream. With the adoption of the 1997 Constitution, the road from a common voters' roll to consociationalism seemed complete.

However, this optimism did not last long. The 1997 Constitution, which was abrogated by the military in April 2009 three years after it deposed a democratically elected government headed by an indigenous Fijian, for the first time introduced a government comprising a significant number of Indo-Fijians in charge of major ministries. In a strange twist of irony, Fijians and Indo-Fijians were together in government and a general elector was now the Leader of the Opposition. The various changing justifications for the coup need not detain us here (see Fraenkel, Firth and Lal, 2009). What is certain is that whatever constitutional arrangements are put in place in future, the military will have a powerful say. The military regime has promised to introduce a common voters' roll. It has decreed that all Fiji citizens be known as 'Fijian', and there are other democratic measures in the pipeline. These measures do not hide where true power in Fiji lies, however. Indo-Fijians are no longer a major factor in the long-term political future of the country. Their numbers are declining, and within a decade or so they will be less than a third of the total population. Most Indo-Fijians do not see a future for themselves and

especially their children in Fiji. More than 120,000 have left since the coup of 1987, and more would leave if they only could.

A common voters' roll may not be the panacea its advocates imagine it to be: it has not been so for Indians in Malaysia, for example, or in parts of the Caribbean. A common voters' roll and consociationalism are now largely concepts for academic debate. The Fiji Indian is uprooted and is on the move: 'from immigration to emigration' may in the end be the dominant narrative of the Indo-Fijian experience, as it is of many Indian diasporic communities scattered around the world.

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