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## All Saints' Primary, Labasa

Christine Weir

### Christine Weir: Personal Journey

I studied history at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom and then trained as a history teacher. In 1976, I accompanied my husband Tony to the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji, where he was employed as a lecturer in physics, and for eight years I taught in Fiji schools, learned about Pacific history and did some tutoring at USP in social science and education. This experience started my interest in Pacific history and anthropology and, during the following years while resident in Canberra, I returned to study at The Australian National University (ANU), completing a master's degree in anthropology with a focus on the Pacific.

I then embarked on a PhD in Pacific history at ANU (2003) on missionary ideas about work in Fiji and Solomon Islands. During this time, I was supervised by Donald Denoon, Bronwen Douglas and Brij Lal, and worked alongside Morgan Tuimaleali'ifano and Kambati Uriam, who were to become colleagues at USP. In 2007 I returned to Fiji to take up the position of lecturer in history at USP, which I held for seven years, teaching a variety of courses in Pacific and world history, supervising several research students, and researching colonial and contemporary Christianity in the Pacific. Since returning to Canberra in 2014, I have continued my research as an honorary lecturer in the College of Asia and the Pacific at ANU, and am currently working on a biography of Bishop Jabez Bryce, the first indigenous bishop of Polynesia.

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In the middle of 1958, All Saints' Anglican School in Labasa welcomed a series of visitors, all of whom recorded their impressions in the school's logbook.<sup>1</sup> Bruce McCall, secretary of the Australian (Anglican) Board of Missions (the school's sponsors), described the school as 'very impressive'; Mr G. William of the Colonial Office commented on the 'opportunities for lively and creative activity'; and the Indian High Commissioner thought 'the discipline excellent and the girls and boys neatly dressed and well behaved ... they looked intelligent'. At the end of the year, 18 boys were accepted from class eight into secondary schools and the headmaster, Reverend K. Appasamy, could reflect on a highly successful year.

And, indeed, the All Saints' School logbooks of the 1950s and 1960s, now filmed by the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau in Canberra and available to researchers, show a thriving school. With a constant enrolment of about 400 students in classes one to eight, All Saints' was one of the largest schools in the district. It had a boarding hostel for about 20 boys, but most of the students were from the town and immediate surrounds—the children of shopkeepers, tradesmen and civil servants. With fees of 30 shillings a term,<sup>2</sup> it was beyond the financial reach of most small agriculturalists. This was acknowledged by the governing board, but there was felt to be little alternative if the school was to stay afloat financially. Reverend Appasamy commented in 1956, 'What we lose in quantity may be balanced in quality'. He noted with approval that in July 1957, 75 per cent of the boys were wearing shoes, clearly a marker of affluence. While it had a majority of Indo-Fijian students, All Saints' School offered the relatively rare experience of a multiracial education, with about 50–60 Fijian and part-European students, according to the few figures available of the racial composition of the school. Hindi and Fijian were taught alongside English. The school was coeducational in the first three

1 The All Saints' School logbooks for 1924–39 and 1952–70 have been filmed by the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (PMB), The Australian National University, and are to be found at PMB 430. The information in this chapter, unless otherwise indicated, comes from these logbooks.

2 This was the figure in 1956. Boarding fees were then £10 a term, or £7 plus 60 pounds (27.2 kg) of rice.

years, the girls (or at least those whose parents allowed them to continue, a proportion that grew over the period) then going mostly to St Mary's Anglican School, two miles away.

It was a lively school. The school's scout troop went on regular hikes and camps: in 1952, they climbed the peak of Bukalevu in March and went on a 'tramping and island camp' in June. In 1958, and in later years, the school troop won the local proficiency challenge. There was a Brownie pack for the young girls. The school regularly displayed produce at the Young Farmers' Club Shows, sometimes winning prizes. The grounds were planted with shrubs and trees, for beauty as well as an agricultural exercise. In 1957, the boys planted 500 sticks of cassava, 100 pineapple plants and a row of banana trees, and constructed a pergola with creepers to camouflage the septic tank, while the next year, under Augustine Sitaram's guidance, senior boys planted a row of trees for Arbor Day. Soccer and athletics were popular activities, All Saints' soccer team proving particularly successful in the early 1950s, when one of their teachers, Mohammed Yasim Khan, also played for the Labasa soccer team. The students were regularly reminded of the empire and their loyalties to it. Empire Day school gatherings were addressed by the District Officer. Students attended films entitled *The Funeral of George VI*, *Royal Destiny* and *A Queen is Crowned*. Year groups went on end-of-year picnics to Malau, Batiri or the Three Sisters. Nurses and doctors visited the school to inspect teeth—finding in the process a distressing number of dental caries—and to inoculate children against tuberculosis and typhoid, and, by the mid-1960s, against the scourge of polio. All in all, this was a thriving and successful school.

And it was a Christian school, following a long tradition of mission involvement in the education of children. When the Methodists, the first Christian missionaries in Fiji, started village education, it was primarily to make their converts literate and able to read the Bible. Alongside this was the aim of 'civilising' Fijians and introducing 'British values'. Christianity and literacy had been readily adopted by Fijians and the small schools started by the Methodists soon became part of the village scene. Most were taken over by village committees during the 1930s, while the Methodist missions maintained responsibility for teacher training at Davuilevu, and at some secondary and higher elementary schools, including Lelean Memorial School for boys, Ballantine Memorial School for girls, Lautoka Boys' School and Jasper Williams School for girls.

In relation to the Indo-Fijians, the situation was different. Until 1901, the Methodist Church paid little attention to the *girmitiyas*, the indentured Indians. Although the Indian catechist John Williams arrived in 1892, the Mission Board in Sydney saw evangelising *girmitiyas* as low on their list of priorities.<sup>3</sup> What concerned missionaries was the effect of Indians on their Fijian converts who had accepted Christianity at the hands of the Methodists, but who were as yet ‘babes in the faith’, had not reached Christian maturity and could be easily subverted by ‘evil’. The proprietorial attitude of Methodist missions towards ‘their’ Fijian converts is clear in the 1910 comment of a Methodist visitor to Fiji, Mr Morley, ‘If we do not Christianise these Indians, they will Paganise our Fijians’. While those who worked with Indians—particularly Hannah Dudley, John Burton and Richard Piper—saw their conversion as an end in itself, the view that it was merely a means to the end of preserving the faith of Fijian Christians was prevalent among Methodists.

Education among Indo-Fijians was initially, as among Fijians, an aid to conversion and to enable the reading of the scriptures. But few conversions took place and Indians showed little interest in Christianity. Evangelism proved fruitless and frustrating; indeed, so frustrating that in 1919 the Methodists handed over their Indian work on Vanua Levu to the Anglicans and concentrated their efforts on Viti Levu. This explains why the non-Catholic Christian schools for Indo-Fijians in Labasa were run by the Anglicans; All Saints’ School was started in 1924 by Miss Irene Cobb, an Australian lay missionary. The *girmitiyas*, however, while resisting attempts to convert them to Christianity, showed great interest in the education missions were offering. This remained true throughout the 20th century. Although the *girmitiyas* recognised early that education was their best means of economic advancement, indeed, even of survival, the colonial government was not much interested in providing such education.

Until the 1918 establishment of the (government-run) Natabua Indian School, mission education was the only education available to Indians and it remained important, especially at the higher grades. In 1944, 63 per cent of those Indian children who were in education attended committee schools, 7 per cent government schools and 30 per cent

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3 For details of the Methodist catechists, teachers and missionaries to the Indo-Fijians, see Sidal 1997; Thornley 1974; Wood 1978.

Christian mission schools (Stephens 1944:12).<sup>4</sup> While the absolute number of Indo-Fijian children in school was higher in the 1950s, the proportions in the various types of school remained fairly constant. Some writers have suggested that Indians resisted mission education; it seems rather that, though they might have preferred it to be run by groups other than Christian missions, they welcomed any high-quality education. As the Anglican priest C. W. Whonsbon-Aston put it: 'The Indian of today in Fiji ... is healthy and eager for education and filled with the growing pains of emancipation'.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, Indians worked hard to establish their committee schools in the 1920s and 1930s, they welcomed the Arya Samaj and Sanatan schools, and advocated the establishment of more government schools. Indian opinion welcomed the Stephens Report (1944), which suggested gradually abolishing the 'voluntary system' (whereby the colonial government gave grants-in-aid to mission and committee schools rather than establishing their own schools). This would have secularised education and, Stephens envisaged, would have encouraged multiracial schools (Stephens 1944:58–60).<sup>6</sup> But when the government rejected most of Stephens' recommendations, since it calculated the voluntary system was cheaper, there was little Indians could do about it. In practice, any high-quality education was accepted, and most mission education was academically good. The Christian schools, such as Marist Brothers High School, Suva, and other Catholic schools, the Methodist schools in Lautoka and Suva, and the Anglican schools on Vanua Levu, were always oversubscribed.

From the point of view of the missions—Methodist, Catholic and Anglican—church schools had a twofold purpose: they were a way to expose students to Christianity in the hope that they might convert, and they were in themselves a service to the community. The hope of conversion was always present, but the very low success rate meant that arguments were developed in justification of Christian schools that acknowledged that most students were—and remained—non-Christian. These centred on the 'moral uplift' that Christian education offered to all who were exposed to it. Few in Fiji expressed the issue as succinctly as the Education Committee of the World Missionary Conference (held in Edinburgh

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4 For further discussion of Indo-Fijian educational demands and provision, see Lal 1992:83–86, 102–07, 158–63.

5 *ABM Review* 1953:151 (the monthly journal of the Australian Board of Missions).

6 The Stephens report is also discussed in Whitehead 1978: Chapters 4 and 5.

in 1910) when discussing Christian education in India, where the issues were similar. In India and Ceylon, Christian mission schools and colleges were maintained not just for the education of converts; indeed, it was a matter of concern that few Christian children were in school. Rather, there was a perceived need to change general attitudes in India—what was called the ‘leavening’ or diffusion principle. The report writers put it this way:

So far as the ideals of ‘the new India’ are Christian or semi-Christian; so far as the conceptions of Divine Fatherhood and human brotherhood, and Christian moral ideals, have come to prevail; so far as caste distinctions have weakened and the true position of women recognised; so far as prejudice against Christ and Christianity has been broken down, it is to the education given in mission schools and colleges that a great part of this good result is attributed (World Missionary Conference 1910:11).

It was acknowledged that most pupils in Christian schools and colleges were not Christian, but missionaries hoped that increased ‘spiritual influence’ might lead to a greater moral awareness and concern for other people, which would lead to a better society.

The same ideas can be seen at All Saints’. In 1939, the headmaster of All Saints’, Rev. R. L. Crampton, wrote in the logbook:

As a teacher one is aware of the great responsibility involved in preparing young Indians to take their places in the community of this Colony. Firmly believing that our Lord’s teaching is the best foundation in life, we endeavour to hand on this teaching.

Or, as Canon W. G. Thomas, in a general article on Fiji for an Australian audience, wrote:

In [the Labasa Anglican schools] many hundreds of young men and women have been helped to become good and useful citizens and the influence and example of dedicated mission teachers have helped to shape their characters (1954:140).

But the argument for church schools could be developed beyond the ‘leavening principle’. During the 1920s, influenced in part by the principles behind the Covenant of the League of Nations, Christian scholars began to argue that for moral and humanitarian reasons they should prepare ‘less-developed peoples’ for self-government and the end of colonialism, primarily through education. In other words, assisting the secular education of Pacific Island peoples could be seen as a Christian

duty. In Fiji, there were two aspects of education in which the missions believed they possessed unique insights rooted in Christian ideals: in running multiracial institutions and in the education of girls. Most mission schools, on principle, at least attempted to attract students from varying ethnic backgrounds, though language difficulties could make this difficult at the primary level. Christian missions had long regarded the respectful treatment and advancement of women—in theory, at least—to be a marker of western Christian culture. Methodists and Catholics emphasised the importance of girls' education and the Methodists prided themselves on the success of Dudley House School, Suva, and Jasper Williams School, Lautoka, in attracting and educating Indian girls.

The Anglican mission felt it important that All Saints' remain a multiracial school, even with a large Indo-Fijian majority, and made considerable efforts to have one Fijian teacher on the staff, teaching the Fijian language, even though the turnover in such a position was high. While it was predominantly a boys' school, the acceptance of girls in All Saints' junior classes was an attempt to encourage girls' education, for it was believed that parents would be more likely to let their girls go to school if they could accompany their brothers while small. The Anglican mission took as much care and effort over staffing and equipping St Mary's Girls' School as it did for All Saints'. Indeed, missionary teachers were employed at St Mary's for considerably longer than at All Saints'.

It was, however, debatable just how effective schools were as evangelistic institutions. In the 1940s, the Methodists considered just this issue. A questionnaire was sent out from the Methodist office in Sydney to all involved in the Indian mission, attempting to ascertain why there were so few conversions among Indo-Fijians. Reasons suggested by missionaries for the lack of interest in Christianity included the growth of Indian nationalism, the arrogance of European missionaries, resulting in perceived discrimination against Indians, the growth of the Arya Samaj, and disunity and bickering among Indian Christians. Questions were also asked about the effectiveness in evangelism of the schools. Stanley Andrews suggested that 'the influence of Christian teaching and example is remarkable ... no one leaves hostile to Christianity'.<sup>7</sup> Ivy Laphorne commented on 'the educated, happy children in the schools' and especially noted the number of girls undertaking nursing courses after Christian

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7 The questionnaire and the responses to it are in the Methodist Overseas Mission archives at the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

education. Norman Wright saw schools as having ‘the advantage of systematic Christian teaching and the opportunity to show the poverty and inadequacy of the old thought’. But he also noted how rare conversions were: between 1922 and 1944, 1,021 boys had passed through Lautoka Boys’ School, but only 24 were baptised as a result of their Christian education there.

In general, the missionaries advocated more direct evangelism—more use of public preaching, home visiting and systematic biblical study. Ramsay Deoki pointed out that most Indian Christians, certainly ‘the most satisfactory and staunchest supporters of our work’, had converted after direct evangelism rather than through schools. In general, direct evangelism was increased by the Methodists in the 1940s and 1950s. No new Indian schools were opened, though existing ones developed their secondary classes and two of the existing schools were handed over to committee control in the 1950s. Established schools seem to have accepted that while conversions were unlikely, in the words of A. Harold Wood, ‘the schools were respected in the community for their integrity of purpose and the quality of their teaching’ (1978 2:52). While the Methodists may have come to this conclusion by the 1950s, the Anglicans, later in the field, were still struggling to assess the effectiveness of church schools; in many ways, the story of the 1950s and 1960s at All Saints’ is the story of the Anglicans coming to terms with the limitations of schools as evangelistic institutions.

The tension between church schools as tools for evangelism and as preparation for secular citizenship showed itself over two practical issues: Christian staff recruitment and religious holidays. Until 1960, the head teacher of All Saints’ was a missionary, usually a European priest, though from 1953 to 1955 a New Zealand woman missionary, Margaret Young, was in charge, and, from 1956 to 1959, the head was Indian-born, US-educated Reverend K. Appasamy. He was a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society with degrees from Hartford and Boston and it is not clear why he was in Labasa; the Indian High Commissioner certainly thought he was wasting his time in a provincial primary school. Head teachers aimed to have Christian staff, but scarcity made this difficult. In most years, only three or four members of staff were Christian, though others, such as R. Chellappa Gouden, were married to Christians (ABM 1956:76). As Reverend Wallace commented in 1952, ‘The only way to get a Christian staff is to have our own Christian boys stay on as recognised teachers [i.e. as unqualified teachers]’. He readily took on

'Jairam, who has recently been baptised' and who had just left class eight. There was competition between Christian schools for the few qualified Christian teachers. Jagdish Ram Sahay, a new teacher at All Saints' in 1961, left after two years to gain wider experience with the Methodists and became head teacher of Dudley High School in the late 1970s.

Since most students and staff were non-Christians, their desire to celebrate their own religious holidays became a contentious issue. A pragmatic man, Wallace closed the school in 1952 for the Holi festival and for Ram Lila. When Muslim teachers and students asked for leave for Eid, they were told that 'they were free to join in the worship of the festival and should count that their duty instead of coming to school, but that those who did not attend the festival should go to school'. Miss Young found herself in conflict with her staff when she tried to enforce only Christian holidays. She disapproved of teachers taking a day off for Holi, and when they requested leave for Diwali she refused, telling them it was not a school holiday. Three members of staff took absence regardless and were reported to the Education Officer. Appasamy was more pragmatic; faced with the choice of making Diwali or All Saints' Day (1 November) a school holiday, he chose Diwali because, he wrote, if he chose All Saints' Day most of the school would be absent on Diwali anyway and more time would be wasted.

In 1960, the first local, Jwala Prasad Singh, was appointed as headmaster. A Christian, he was married to Ethel, daughter of Methodist minister Ishwari Prasad, and they had both taught at All Saints' since 1947. In 1953, Jwala Singh was sponsored by the Anglicans to go to Auckland University for a year's study at undergraduate level and, on return, he gained promotion to grade one teacher. As headmaster from 1960 to 1962, he appears to have run a successful school. The government inspectors praised his administration, and visiting teacher Moti Lal wrote, 'A very good start has been made by the present Head Master. Discipline has vastly improved'. Secondary entrance results improved from eight passes in 1960 to 13 in 1961 and 20 in 1962. In practice, places at the less prestigious secondary schools were available to some children who had completed class eight but who had failed to pass all subjects in the entrance examination, so the numbers continuing on to secondary schools were somewhat higher. No fewer than four visiting clerics wrote glowing reports of the school in the logbook between September and December 1962. Singh ran his school with moderation and pragmatism; there were few disputes over religious matters. Indeed, the school was conforming to

the government's expectations of providing good education through grants to voluntary groups. Missions and school committees acted as suppliers of education to, and in close association with, the colonial government, with regular visits from government inspectors, agricultural advisors and health workers.

Jwala Prasad Singh's successor, Reverend Peter Thirlwell, aimed to change the focus of the school, apparently reacting against Singh's academic and secular emphasis. Thirlwell wrote in the logbook in January 1963, 'It is the hope of the mission staff that All Saints' will once again become an effective instrument in the evangelisation [underlined] of this island'. The school day was extended to allow for 15 minutes of divinity for all students daily, though this soon proved problematic since there were only three Christian teachers on staff. When students and teachers were absent for Holi, they were reprimanded with the comment that 'this school observes Christian holy days'. May Day was 'observed in the Christian tradition as a day of Our Lady', with a sermon from the vicar and a hymn singing competition, and Ascension Day was similarly marked. All Saints' Day became the school holiday of choice and, when Hindu teachers requested leave for Diwali, they were refused. Half the students were absent anyway and the Hindu teachers complained to the Education Officer (Northern), who was not inclined to become involved. The new regime did not last. Thirlwell left after less than a year, and his term can be seen as a last evangelical fling before the school settled down to being an academic school, without undue emphasis on religion.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, the Anglicans, like the Methodists, changed their policy to place more emphasis on the direct evangelism of the Indo-Fijian community, rather than relying on the indirect influence of schools. Mr Jivaratnam, who had been the woodwork and Hindi teacher at All Saints', left teaching to become a full-time evangelist with the Anglican Mission in 1955 and, by 1958, a woman evangelist was being sought from India (ABM 1958a). It was now recognised that concentrating on the children was not enough; adult evangelism, bible study, home worship and village meetings were critical (ABM 1958b:104). These years saw other Anglican initiatives with the development of the Bailey Clinic in Suva and Sister Betty Slader's evangelism and medical work around the Rewa Delta from 1960. These projects, rather than the schools, were seen as the future of Anglican evangelism to the Indo-

Fijians. The acceptance at St John's College, Suva, of Edward Armogam, the first Indo-Fijian Anglican ordination student, was a matter for great rejoicing (ABM 1960:74).

Back in Labasa, R. Kalyan Chandra, another Indian Christian, was appointed headmaster at the beginning of 1964. He ran a regime much like Jwala Singh's. Visitors again commented on the high standards of academic and agricultural work, comments that suggest such standards may have slipped under the previous regime. Nonetheless, Chandra's administration satisfied the religious authorities. Bishop John Vockler, visiting in late 1964, noted, 'I have been very impressed with the appearance of the grounds and the School, which I believe to be the outward appearance of a good spirit'. After only nine passes in the secondary entrance examination in 1963 under Thirlwell, results steadily improved again: 16 out of 17 students passed in 1964, and all 28 candidates were successful in 1966. The new South Pacific Commission Tate reading scheme was introduced. All Saints' students won essay and other national competitions. In short, by the mid-1960s, the Anglican mission seems to have accepted the inevitability of very limited evangelical success, and concentrated on academic excellence and the extension of the school to secondary level in the mid-1970s. Its main task was now seen as the preparation of its charges to be good citizens of the new, independent Fiji.

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