

PREFACE

*The struggle of man against power is the struggle of
memory against forgetting.*

Milan Kundera

Hindsight is dead sight after all, jealous of memory that breathes.

MG Vassanji

Jai Ram Reddy was the most significant Indo-Fijian leader of postcolonial Fiji until his departure from the political stage in 1999, just as AD Patel had been the greatest leader of the Indo-Fijian community in colonial Fiji until his death in 1969. Both men, from different historical eras, political contexts and experience of politics, espoused a vision for Fiji which failed to materialize in their own time, but which now stands vindicated. The unheralded father of Fiji's independence movement, Patel died a year before Fiji became independent, though not on terms which he would have approved. His lifelong struggle for a democratic, equitable, and non-racial political culture in Fiji was vehemently opposed by his political opponents who privileged primordiality over political ideology, and for whom race in time became the inexorable fact of life in the political governance of the country. It is now widely acknowledged on all sides that preoccupation with race and the politics of racial compartmentalization without political partnership has been a major cause of Fiji's postcolonial difficulties.¹

Reddy espoused the politics of moderation and, more particularly, the politics of consociationalism, that is, guaranteed group representation in parliament and mandatory power-sharing among the major communities embedded in the constitution itself and not left to the vagaries of the electoral process. He talked reconciliation in post-1987 Fiji, seeking solutions to the country's political and economic problems that were practical and

incremental, not ideological and absolute, always seeking, wherever possible, the consensus middle ground. Principled pragmatism informed by a large measure of realism was the hallmark of Reddy's political philosophy. His consociationalist vision found expression in the once widely acclaimed 1997 Constitution of Fiji, of which he was a co-principal architect, although he himself was not destined to remain on the political stage long enough to ensure its success, or to protect it from insurgents, who finally tore it up in April 2009. In their 'defeats' suffered in the quest for social justice, human dignity and political equality, both Patel and Reddy stand tall, both concluding their political lives as statesmen of stature and integrity, though like the proverbial prophets, not finding honour, or even broad acceptance, among their own people in their own lifetime. Montaigne is surely right: 'There are some defeats more triumphant than victories.'

In an earlier book, *A Vision for Change: AD Patel and the Politics of Fiji*, I attempted a narrative of the political evolution of the Indo-Fijian community from the 1920s to the eve of independence in the late 1960s through the prism of the life and work of AD Patel. In this book, which may be read as a sequel to my earlier work, I seek to trace the contours of Indo-Fijian politics from the early years of independence in 1970 to the final years of the 20th century through the prism of Jai Ram Reddy's life and work. This volume, like the earlier one, is not a biography in the conventional sense of a written life of another person. It is more in the nature, I suppose, of a political history of the subject. The focus is not on Reddy the man and his interior life or his private emotional world. Such an approach would require a degree of intimacy with the subject that I do not possess. Moreover, that kind of project is beyond my competence and even inclination to pursue. Oedipus complex and all that are not for me. I accept for the purpose of this project that the public self is the 'real' self. Hence the focus on Jai Ram Reddy's public life and his engagement with the dominant political issues and concerns of his time shaped by the master narratives of colonialism and postcolonialism. This approach is entirely appropriate for historical enquiry because, as someone has said, the public life of public men, dead or alive, is

the property of the people. Their lives in truth constitute a direct transaction with history. Given my approach, I hope this book will also be read as a collective portrait, a snapshot, of a people and a place at a particular moment in Fiji's late 20th century history.

I readily acknowledge the dangers of seeing the past through the experience of one individual. It is far too tempting, in this approach, to impute too much importance and impact to the actions and thoughts of one person when, as is so often the case, the person actually represents the consensus of a larger group of which he was merely a spokesman. The approach could also potentially frustrate an understanding of the deeper forces of change over time that transcends the range of personal experience. All that said, it is still true that some men and women do achieve a level of political eminence and practical authority in the affairs of their societies and are able, by force of personality and personal intervention, charisma or cunning, to mould events to suit their purposes and thus affect the course of history. I hope that Jai Ram Reddy will come across in this book both as an agent as well as a mirror of change, reflecting the dilemmas of the time in which he lived, and the strengths and weaknesses as well as the fears and fractures in the lives of the people he led for the better part of three decades.

'Biographers,' writes David Taylor, himself the splendid writer of George Orwell's life, 'very often fall catastrophically out of love with their subject.'² He did not count himself among them. Nor do I. The aim of the biographer, says Patrick French, the writer of VS Naipual's equally superb authorized life, 'should not be to sit in judgment, but to explore the subject with ruthless clarity to the calm eye of the reader.'³ Open-mindedness and clarity: certainly; but I would add another attribute: sympathetic understanding. I have seen enough of politics at work from close range, enough of the role that contingency, emotion and sheer stupidity play in human affairs so as not to rush to judgment. I have seen enough decision-making done on the run, in the heat of the moment, without the privilege of leisurely reflection and detailed research, to approach the past with a proper sense of humility. Still, 'I have said all the good and all the evil,' as William Butler

Yeats says in the preface to the *Trembling of the Veil*, 'I have kept nothing back necessary to understanding.'

That said, I should be candid with the readers at the outset. I am in broad sympathy with Jai Ram Reddy's political philosophy and approach to politics in Fiji and the fundamental transformation he sought to bring about in its political culture and orientation. The essential course Reddy attempted to chart for his people and his vision of their place in the larger scheme of things was intrinsically right. That it failed to ignite their imagination and caused them instead to desert him and all that he stood for is a matter for legitimate debate and discussion, but there is now a gradually gathering consensus across the political spectrum, even among his erstwhile opponents, that had it succeeded, Fiji would almost certainly have been spared the agony and turmoil it was later to encounter in its troubled journey towards the 21st century. Reddy's defeat was, in my judgment, a hugely missed opportunity for Fiji, among so many other missed opportunities that haunt the country's forlorn landscape of the 20th century. 'What might have been' must surely count among the saddest phrases in the English language.

It is always difficult, in a book such as this, to strike a balance between the information that should be provided to enable readers to make their own judgments about a particular issue in debate, on the one hand, and the need, on the other, not to clutter the narrative with excessive extraneous detail that leaves little room for interpretation and context. The general level of scholarship on Fiji politics is sophisticated and varied enough, but much of it is inaccessible to the general public. The difficulty is compounded by the depressing absence of a vigorous reading culture in Fiji; and many journals which once served as vehicles for debate and discussion, on which I have drawn extensively, are now gone and old issues found, if they are found at all, on the bare shelves of a few public libraries.⁴ I have therefore provided as comprehensive a coverage of events in postcolonial Fiji as I have deemed it necessary for my purposes, and based my interpretation on the evidence provided. That evidence is both verifiable and ascertainable.

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There will be readers who will ask whether I have been objective and impartial in my interpretations. It is a fair question. I do not invoke an impartiality I do not feel. I am a part of the history I am narrating, not a cold observer outside or above it. As the distinguished historian of Japan, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, puts it, ‘We live enmeshed in structures, institutions and webs of ideas which are the product of history, formed by acts of imagination, courage, generosity, greed and brutality performed by previous generations.’⁵ I am no exception. I was in my early university years when Jai Ram Reddy entered the national political arena and have been, for most of the period covered by this book, an interested bystander, and a regular student of it, and for a brief moment, a minor participant in the history I now narrate. Reddy’s story is inevitably refracted through the lens of my own personal experience and political perspective. It cannot be otherwise. It is, in an important sense, my story too. Facts don’t speak for themselves, contrary to what we learnt in school all those years ago. They never do. They only speak when spoken to, and they silently answer questions we ask of them. And history can often be such an opaque, tangled web of myths, truths, emotions and intrigues, ‘connected and divided,’ as Isaiah Berlin puts it, ‘by literally innumerable unidentifiable links — and gaps and sudden discontinuities too, visible and invisible.’⁶

Scholarship of any kind is always partial, in both senses of the word, however much we may be loathe to admitting it. In my research effort over the last three decades or so, I have followed the advice of that distinguished humanist and my onetime colleague at The Australian National University, Professor OHK Spate. ‘The impartiality,’ Spate says, ‘which evades responsibility by saying nothing, the partiality which masks its bias by presenting slanted facts with an air of cold objectivity — these are a thousand times more dangerous than an open declaration of where one stands; then at least those who disagree can take one’s measure with confidence: ‘that is why he said thus.’ The important points, Spate continues, ‘are that inference must be made based on evidence, as carefully verified as possible; and that the choice shall be made from the evidence, and not

from pre-conceived ideas.’⁷ That, I hope, will be the criteria used to judge this study.

Recognition, then, of one’s position is important in any work of scholarship. There is another: humility. Hindsight should not hound history, nor the present prosecute the past. Monday morning quarterbacking, as the phrase goes in the United States, is tempting, but it is an indulgence best left to the faculty tea room. The case for authorial humility is wonderfully expressed in the words of the American panjandrum Teddy Roosevelt. ‘It is not the critic who counts,’ he writes, ‘not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.’ The credit, he continues, ‘belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, who spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly.’⁸ There should always be room for criticism and evaluation, for history at the end of it all, as someone has said, is an argument without an end; but it should always be tempered by a sensitive appreciation of context, contingency and circumstance.

This book has been in the making for far too long. It was begun in a Fiji very different to the one in which it was completed. I conceived the project sometime in the late 1990s, though precisely when I cannot now recall. But then things changed. There was, to start with, Jai Ram Reddy’s defeat in the 1999 general elections. The following year, George Speight, a self-proclaimed but spurious Fijian nationalist, sprang his improbable quasi-coup against the government led by Mahendra Chaudhry. There then followed a period of uncertainty when the spirit of the constitution, in whose formulation Reddy had such a big hand, was disregarded or otherwise breached to placate powerful fringe elements in society. In December 2006, Commodore Frank Bainimarama carried out Fiji’s fourth military coup in two decades, unleashing forces which have the potential to alter Fiji’s political fabric forever. A Fijian-dominated army confronting a Fijian-

dominated government was not a scenario many people in Fiji would have contemplated a decade ago — or ever — nor the unceremonious humbling and humiliation of the central social institutions of indigenous Fijian community. ‘Indigenous rights’ was such a potent and inevitably polarizing rallying cry in the first thirty years of postcolonial Fiji: both the 1987 as well as the 2000 coups were justified in its name, but it now lies on the margins of mainstream political discourse in Fiji as indigenous Fijians have become the outright majority of the total population and control the levers of major public institutions in the country.

The principal cause of this change has been the enormous demographic transformation in Fiji over the last two decades with far-reaching political consequences. When Reddy entered politics in the 1970s, Indo-Fijians were close to fifty percent of the population. By the time he finished his career, they were reduced to about forty per cent, and declining further (through unceasing emigration and a low birth rate). This trend will continue long into the future. With this decrease has forever vanished the fear of ‘Indian domination,’ which, as this book will show, infected the body politic of Fiji like a deadly virus since the end of the Second World War when the Indo-Fijian component of Fiji’s population exceeded the indigenous Fijians’ for the first time. Space has opened up for public debate about intra-Fijian issues — provincial tensions and disparities, disputes about chiefly titles and entitlements, dynastic ambitions of leading chiefly families — which once remained carefully hidden from the public view, taboo subjects for public discussion. The ethnic and political concerns, which animated political debate in Fiji once, have lost their salience and potency. In an important sense, this book could well be read as an epitaph to an era of politics now vanishing before our eyes.

A word about the structure of the book is in order. The book is essentially a historical narrative treating, after an introductory chapter, the political developments in Fiji from the 1970s to the late 1990s. I have scrupulously followed the advice the King gave to the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. When the White Rabbit asked the King, ‘Where shall I begin,

please, Your Majesty?’ the King replied: ‘Begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end, and then stop.’ So it is here. The narrative is interrupted only once, in Chapter Six (Transitions), where I attempt an assessment of what went on before 1987, the year of the coups, and what followed afterwards. The date also provides a convenient break as an exact mid-point in Reddy’s political career.

There is one other novel aspect of the structure that should be mentioned: the inclusion of ‘Interlude’ at the end of each chapter. This section includes a single, or sometimes several, pieces by Jai Ram Reddy himself on some aspect of the issues covered in a particular chapter. I have drawn on this material to construct my own text, so it is not absolutely necessary for readers to read this section to get the flow if they are minded to continue uninterrupted with the connected narrative; but if they wish to read Reddy’s own thoughts about his fears and concerns, his position on issues and his vision for the future, they can do so, and in the process check my interpretation against the subject’s own words. They can, to use Edward Said’s words (borrowed from music), read the two sections ‘contrapuntally.’ I could have put the ‘Interlude’ section in an appendix at the end. But an appendix is an appendix after all. This book is both a coherent narrative as well as an archive of words spoken and written by the subject himself.

Many people have helped me with the research for this book, beginning with Mr Jai Ram Reddy himself. At first understandably reticent and wary about his political past being probed and paraded before the world, he cooperated fully with me, though from a discreet distance and with appropriate disinterestedness. He gave me all his papers and spoke to me candidly and at length but issued no direction and placed no restrictions on the use I could make of the material. He read the completed manuscript with care and corrected errors or distortions in it. Still, I should state emphatically for the record that this is not in any sense an ‘authorized’ biography, and that Mr Reddy should not be held responsible for the use — or misuse — I have made of the material he generously made available to me. I have also drawn freely and extensively on my own previous writings on Fiji history

and politics and on the published record in the form of Hansard and newspaper reports, conference proceedings, internal party documents, and private papers. The story I tell here is thus constructed from this kaleidoscopic mass of information. I have not thought it necessary in a book like this to provide a minute documentation of every piece of evidence I have used. I give the readers my solemn word that every ‘fact’ mentioned and every quotation cited here is verifiable. The newspapers and the proceedings of the Fiji parliament are at the National Archives of Fiji in Suva. Reddy’s private papers are with the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau at The Australian National University in Canberra. Regrettably, papers in private hands are not as accessible or as safe.

My research also benefited immensely from the generous conversations I had with scores of people from all walks of life, all over Fiji, over nearly a decade. Among them were Reddy’s implacable political opponents as well as his colleagues. This has been one of the most rewarding and enjoyable aspects of my fieldwork. The memory of the copious bladder-bursting kava sessions, the rustic, thigh-slapping humour, the inebriated singing long into the night, the passionate late-night arguments unable mysteriously to be recalled at all in the morning, will remain with me. So, too, will the haunting faces of ordinary men and women, hidden from the public view, beyond the reach of official statistics and influence, ever ready to share whatever little they have, never complaining, going about their daily business with dignity and courage. ‘Loyalty’ is not just another word to them. It is the creed by which they live their daily lives. It is ordinary people like these, children of the soil — a Narend Reddy in Garampani, Tavua, or a Shardha Nand in Korovuto, Nadi (now gone) — who draw you to Fiji, who make the place what it is: endearing and loveable, and beyond the reach of words.

Some friends went beyond the call of friendly duty and offered to read portions of the manuscript for me. I am deeply indebted to them for their insights and judgments and corrections of factual and stylistic errors. They are too many to be named individually, and some I know do not want to be acknowledged publicly at all, but I must thank Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi,

Kamal Iyer, Ashwin Raj, Jagindar Singh, Pramod Rae, and Biman Prasad in Suva, Janardan Reddy in Canberra, Karam Ramrakha, Robert Norton and Stewart Firth in Sydney, Doug Munro in Wellington, John Henderson in Canterbury, and Jacqui Leckie in Otago, for reading parts of the manuscript and making many helpful suggestions. To Bob Norton especially I owe more than I can express in words for the care with which he scrutinized the final draft, as from a different angle did the esteemed fiction writer Kaaron Warren.

Several old timers with whom I spoke were visibly distressed as they recalled the heartaches caused by the futile battles of the past now lying dormant in the vanishing memory of a passing generation, and wondered aloud whether there was any point at all in dwelling on them. The community had endured enough self-flagellation, they said. The past was past; the old protagonists were gone, unable now to refute or verify the story I tell here; old battle scars were disappearing, and there was need for closure, to move on. I understand their sentiments but do not share them. The past is never really past, as William Faulkner reminded us all those years ago. The past, as they say, is always present. Or, as Oodgeroo Noonuccal puts it, 'Let no one say the past is dead/the past is all about us and within.' There is no denying that parts of the story told here are indeed painful: the debilitating factionalism, the endless in-fighting, the patent falsehoods, the masterful cynicism, the political savagery and self-serving calculations and deliberate distortions nurtured for the sole purpose of gaining political mileage. The pornography of the naked grab for power on full display is never a wholesome sight.

All this, together with the undoubted achievements, is also a part of our history and our political heritage. It cannot be ignored or wished away. I live with the certainty that this book will be one among many, many conversations about Fiji in the years to come, and that Jai Ram Reddy's perspectives and interventions will be revised in the fullness of time as other accounts come to light. There will always be room for multiple perspectives on the past. That is the way it always is, and should be; and we all have

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our roles to play. It is the historian's job always to remember what others have forgotten, or conveniently chosen to forget. Or, as a few lines from an anonymous poem put it: 'The past is gone/Only fragments remain/My task is to find out/And tell the world.' In undertaking the task of remembering, Voltaire's advice is worth heeding as well: 'To the living one owes respect; to the dead one owes the truth.'

I thank institutions and individuals who gave me access to records in their possession. The first among them always will have to be the National Archives of Fiji where I have spent intermittent periods of research for nearly thirty years. Setareki Tale, the Archivist, Salesia Ikaniwai, the Chief Librarian, and her assistant, Asena Dame, were invariably courteous and helpful, as was the staff at the Parliamentary Research Library in Suva where I consulted unpublished official parliamentary records. At the Pacific Collection of the University of the South Pacific, Jainul Nisha and Leela Reddy bravely provided assistance with newspapers and other records. The staff at the Madras State Archives in Chennai were courteous and cooperative, as were district officials in Cudappah. Kamal Iyer opened up the rich and extensive archives of the National Federation Party to me along with his phenomenal memory of the recent political history of Fiji. Netani Rika, the editor of the *Fiji Times*, has my gratitude for permission to use photographs in the custody of his newspaper, and Margaret Keni my thanks for reproducing them. The photographs from the old (pre-1987) *Fiji Sun* are at the National Archives, and those from the now-discontinued magazines are appropriately acknowledged. At Radio Fiji, I was able to listen to some old campaign speeches that speak hauntingly to an era of politics now gone forever.

In Canberra, the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau made available to me the rich archives of the *Fiji Independent News Service* and other contemporary published and unpublished material which deal with the 1987 coups and their immediate aftermath. Ewan Maidment and Kylie Moloney have my sincere thanks for their assistance, as does the staff of the National Library of Australia for permission to consult material in their possession. The Aus-

tralian National Archives in Canberra generously gave me access to their papers on postcolonial Fiji, as did the Public Records Office at Kew Gardens. For access to the latter, I thank Steve Ashton and Mandy Banton, and Niraj and Gabby for photocopying the relevant files for me after I had left the United Kingdom. Emeritus Professor Anthony Low was instrumental in putting my name up to the people at Kew Gardens and in recommending me for a Fellowship at Clare Hall, Cambridge University, where some of the archival material was first digested.

I thank my own Division of Pacific and Asian History in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (as it then was) at The Australian National University for extended periods of leave over several years to complete this study. I should specifically mention Oanh Collins and Dorothy McIntosh who both helped me in innumerable ways that only dedicated support staff can do for word-obsessed but technically Luddite professors, truly remnant in their own time, but most especially for teaching me how to cope with my much-loved but temperamentally grumpy computer mysteriously given to wild mood swings and abrupt shutdowns. To my colleague and great friend Hank Nelson, I owe many conversations, wise and otherwise, in the Coombs Tearoom over the years, along with his collegial editorial pen gently put to good use and sagacious advice about the need to write to be read, rather than just to get ahead. Lindy Shultz designed the book as well as the cover with great care and professionalism and shepherded the manuscript through the production process.

Many people over the years allowed me access to material in their possession or wrote or spoke to share their thoughts and experiences. Among those who are not with us now, I would like to record my appreciation to Sir Vijay R Singh, HM Lodhia and Tomasi Vakatora. Among those still with us, I express particular thanks to Karam Ramrakha who was generous with recollections, Sir Timoci Tuivaga, Qoriniasi Bale, Sitiveni Rabuka, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, Harish Sharma, Ram Krishna, Vinod Patel, Ujagar Singh, Jag Nadan, Jagindar Singh, Kamal Iyer, Bal Govinda, Prabhudas Sidha, Pramod Rae, Attar Singh, Raman Singh, Imrana Jalal, 'Puchla'

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Scholarly convention requires that I absolve everybody who helped me from all the shortcomings of this study. This is not entirely fair, for my views and conclusions have been influenced, in part at least, by the numerous conversations I have had especially with people in Fiji over the years. It could not have been otherwise. Still, habitually doing as I am told, I readily absolve everybody from my sins of omission and commission, except one: my wife, Padma, who should in good conscience be held fully accountable for all the things I have done, or not done, in the course of my enduring indenture to her for nearly forty years.

Brij V. Lal
Canberra and Suva Point, 2009

NOTES

1. I myself do not like to use the word 'race,' but have used it in the book because that is the word used in Fiji. Similarly, I prefer the use of 'Indo-Fijian,' but have used 'Indian' occasionally where the context demanded it. Readers unfamiliar with Fiji should know that 'Indian' is used to describe the Indo-Fijian community.
2. DJ Taylor, *Orwell: The Life* (London: Viking, 2004), 428.
3. Patrick French, *The World Is What It Is: The Authorised Biography of VS Naipaul* (London: Picador, 2008), xvii.
4. For example, *The Review*, *The Weekender*, *The Hindustatni*, *Islands Business*, *Pacific Islands Monthly*.
5. Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *The Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History* (London: Verso, 2005), 26.

6. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1953), 93.
7. OHK Spate, 'Thirty Years Ago: A view of the Fijian Political Scene. Confidential Report to the British Colonial Office,' *Journal of Pacific History* (1990), 25: 103.
8. Quoted by Joe Klein in *Time*, 5 Jan. 2009.