10. Sugar

For well over 100 years, the growing of sugar cane and the production of sugar has been the main economic activity in Fiji, with over a quarter of the population dependent on its wellbeing.

When I began work as Secretary of the Fiji Sugar Board in 1968, the sugar industry had reached a crossroads. For decades it had been the backbone of the Fiji economy, being the greatest foreign export earner and the largest employer. There were some 15,000 cane farmers delivering their cane to a single miller with four sugar mills. The millers employed some 4,000 labourers and the cane farmers engaged about 15,000 cane cutters in the harvesting season. Each farmer worked an average of ten acres of mainly leasehold land. Although the farmers were independent, they felt, and in fact were, dominated by the milling organisation.

The mills were owned by the giant Australian company CSR (Colonial Sugar Refining company) and while they must be given credit for developing the industry, their objective was to make profits for shareholders in Australia. The farmers believed they were being exploited and for years their political leaders had waged an aggressive campaign to gain a greater share of the sugar proceeds. This was determined by a contract between the millers and the farmers which also set out all aspects of the relationship, from growing and harvesting cane, to transport to the mills, crushing and export of sugar.

When negotiations between the growers’ leaders and the millers broke down in 1968, the Chief Justice of Fiji appointed an arbitrator to determine the terms of the new contract.

Following exhaustive efforts, he was successful in appointing Lord Denning, who was the Master of the Rolls in the United Kingdom. When Denning began his hearings in August 1969, Judge Marsack, the Board Chairman, instructed me to attend as an observer. The hearing was conducted in a Catholic Parish Hall in the sugar city of Lautoka. This was a ground level building with wooden shutters around it that could seat about 500.

Denning sat on a raised platform at one end. Though an illustrious aura surrounded him, Denning was a frail little man with sharp features, very white skin, and a quiet voice. Despite his diminutive size and frail appearance, one sensed he was a strong man and there was an implication in his manner that said, ‘Don’t fool with me or waste my time.’ Two advisors had been appointed to assist him in his task. The millers’ representative was the then head of CSR in Fiji, Stuart Hermes. He was a big, gruff man with little sense of humour. He had
come to Fiji from Australia as a young man and had worked his way up from the bottom of a very stratified organisation. As head of the organisation, he wielded enormous power. His staff cowered before him, farmers treated him like a god, and even the colonial civil servants feared him. If CSR wanted the government to do anything, they usually did it.

The other advisor representing the growers was a most unlikely leader. Swami Rudrananda was a Hindu monk who had come to Fiji from India in 1939 to help in the education of Hindus. He quickly empathised with the poverty stricken cane farmers and began to champion their rights. Always garbed in a saffron robe, he seldom wore shoes and often sat cross-legged on a chair in the boardroom, picking his toes. He spoke in a squeaky, high-pitched voice that belied the strength of his character, which was evident in the fiery black eyes that seemed to ignite when his anger flared, as it often did. Swami aroused both violent opposition and a devoted following. In a Sugar Advisory Council meeting on one occasion, when a fellow cane grower’s representative condemned Swami for some statement he made, a loyal supporter rose and punched the critic. Hermes and Judge Marsack loathed him. A devoted follower once gave him a Rolls Royce car. It was put in Swami’s garage and never used.

In a half circle around the hall facing Denning were the main players who were to present their cases. Representing the Growers were a team of five Indian lawyers. Leading the group was A. D. Patel, a brilliant young lawyer who had been sent to Fiji by Mahatma Ghandi to protect the interests of Indians. He rose to political prominence and became the leader of the opposition in the Legislative Council. He was a spellbinding speaker who captivated his listeners by beginning in a soft, slow manner and gradually raising the tempo and volume of his voice until he had his audience in the palm of his hands. Suave and always well groomed, polite and courteous, Patel was a formidable person.

Next to him was his brother, another lawyer, but the antithesis of A. D. While R. D. Patel had a great many cane grower clients, he was regarded as a buffoon. On one occasion, as he was making a presentation to Denning he waved his arms around wildly making a point and knocked a jug of water flying across the table, saturating all the papers on the table.

The third lawyer was S. M. Koya, a Muslim and heir apparent to A. D. Patel as leader of the Indians in Fiji. Koya has been described as an ‘emotional chest-thumping orator full of fire and passion.’ Described by another as ‘an actor and a nuisance,’ Koya had a violent temper that gave him a bully image. Dark, thick set and humourless, it was somewhat surprising that he should become a popular leader. But Koya was a successful legal advocate. He won his cases and knew how to excite public emotions.
The fourth member of the Indian cane growers’ team was another lawyer, K. C. Ramrakha, a methodical and courteous man, who won his support through brilliant debate.

I sat at a table on my own between this group and the CSR team. The company had only two lawyers up front. They were R. G. Kermode, a partner in the most respected firm of lawyers, and his assistant, Barrie Sweetman. Both of them were able and respected legal representatives but we all knew they were simply the mouthpieces for the enormous support team that CSR had brought over from Australia. One of those was the most senior official in Australia, Gordon Jackson. He usually sat inconspicuously in the third or fourth row, listening intently, absorbing everything but never showing emotion. He was a cold and calculating man with steel coloured eyes and a steely temperament.

On the other end of the arch around Denning were the Fijian growers’ representatives. Their team was lead by a young Australian lawyer who was beginning to make his mark in Australian legal circles. Gerald Brennan was later to become a Chief Justice in Australia and his skills were clearly evident as he presented his argument to Denning. He was supported by an Indian lawyer, M. T. Khan, who was given the derogatory sobriquet of M. T. Can. The third member of the team was Aminiasi Katonivualiku, who would in later years disgrace himself by being found guilty of fraud.

Denning was to take evidence from hundreds of witnesses over 21 days of hearing. Each had a different style. CSR had a battery of technical men who gave clinical statements that were hard to dispute. The farmers witnesses told heartwrenching stories of hardship and misery which were all due, they claimed, to the greed and insensitiveness of the CSR management. One star was a senior CSR field executive. He was grilled for over a day by all the lawyers because he was known to be knowledgeable and fair. He was asked hundreds of questions, but before he answered any question he would pick up a glass of water that was on a stool beside his seat and have a drink. As soon as the glass was empty, a clerk would fill it up, and as soon as the jug was empty it would be filled. There was great speculation and amusement around the hall about how many glasses of water he could consume. Interest in his evidence almost seemed secondary. Each day the inside of the hall was packed, with an equal number of farmers outside leaning in through the windows. There was rapt attention as the farmers tried to assess the weight of evidence. They watched Denning eagerly looking for signs that he was favouring their case. But he was the embodiment of dignity and impartiality.

Each Friday I would return to Suva and give my report to Judge Marsack. I knew little about the sugar industry when I joined, and it was like having a crash course, for the inquiry covered every aspect of the industry. On Monday
I would return by plane to Nadi and then by taxi to Lautoka. One Monday morning, my taxi driver, in his haste to get me to the hearing on time, thought he could beat a train across a level crossing. He was mistaken and the train slammed into my side of the taxi, splitting open my head. I went to a doctor and had it stitched up and arrived at the hearing with my head swathed in bandages. Denning was most concerned.

Lord Denning had a reputation of favouring the underdog so it came as little surprise that when his final award was handed down in 1970 he said, ‘If I have erred at all, I think it will be because I have been too favourable to the growers … but I would remind them [the millers] that they have had a good innings—a first rate innings—for the sugar industry in Fiji … they have done well … events have tipped the scale in their favor.’

His award was so favourable to growers that the CSR gave notice that they could not operate under the terms of the contract that he had drawn up, and that they wished to sell their interests in the Fiji sugar industry. The government negotiated a purchase, a local company was set up, over 200 CSR staff withdrew, and the industry was completely localised and changed forever.

Judge Marsack was another casualty of the award. Denning had criticised him over his policy of certifying the proceeds of sugar and this was unacceptable to Marsack. He resigned in fury and for the rest of his life bore a bitter grudge against Denning for tarnishing his reputation.

The Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, whose function it was to appoint the Chairman of the Sugar Board, was successful in bringing back to Fiji one of the most outstanding British civil servants to ever work here. Sir Ian Thompson first arrived in Fiji in the early 1940s as a young District Officer. He immediately joined the Fiji Military Forces and served with distinction in the Solomon’s campaign. This was the beginning of a lifelong affinity with the Fijian people. He spoke Fijian better than most Fijians and served in most districts throughout the islands. Fijians and Indians alike trusted and respected him. He worked closely with the most distinguished Fijian Chief and leader, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, as Deputy Lands Commissioner and a great deal of Sukuna’s mana rubbed off onto him. He succeeded Sukuna as Lands Commissioner and for a time was Acting Governor before being posted to the British Virgin Islands as Governor. When this appointment to the Virgin Islands was announced, the people of Fiji sent a petition to the British Government asking that Thompson not be transferred. When Mara asked him to return to Fiji to take up the position of Chairman of the Sugar Board, he resigned from the Colonial Service and returned to Fiji in 1971.
It was my good fortune to spend the next 13 years working with Sir Ian and this was certainly one of the most rewarding periods of my life.

Part of our work involved settling industrial disputes in the industry. During Marsack’s time, this centered around the settlement of the union’s annual log of claims. There were three unions: the Staff Association, with 250 members, the General Workers Union, which had about 2,500 members, and the Tradesmen’s Union, which had about 500 members. The process with the General Workers Union was that the Company and the Union met and negotiated, with the Chairman and the Secretary of the Sugar Board present as observers. About 20 of the Union executive and four or five company men met and held talks, usually for two days. They dressed in suits and discussion was calm and polite. The long time President of the Union was an Indian lawyer named Manikam Pillay. Manikam was a dapper little man and always showed the greatest respect to those present. He seldom spoke during negotiations, except when deadlock over an issue seemed imminent. At that point he would suggest a compromise, which was usually acceptable. His skill always resulted in a settlement over claims.

The Staff Association was a more militant, intelligent and determined group. There was no Manikam Pillay amongst them and on one occasion the two groups, the Chairman and I sat silently for two hours when a deadlock was reached. During this period, no one was prepared to say a word. Finally, the Chairman lost patience, rose and left, and talks broke down.

The Tradesmen’s Union was made up mainly of part-Europeans, as they were then called. Their members were skilled mechanics who ran the machinery in the mills. The leaders were humble and polite, except when they drank too much. This was their Achilles heel and was manipulated by the company. The talks with them always began in the morning and usually broke down by lunchtime. The company provided lunch and drinks, and when talks resumed in the afternoon, the Union’s representatives were mellow and ready to sign any agreement. The risk in this process was that sometimes the Union men had too much to drink and a passionate, often illogical plea was made for a greater share of the cake, or someone would lose their temper. It must be said that the Company, knowing the Union’s weak negotiating position, always tried to be fair with them.

When I first joined the sugar industry, the secretaries of the General Workers Union were usually rather polite and cooperative men. They had to be, because the company was so dominant that the only way to extract any additional benefits for the workers was to work in harmony with management. But circumstances changed when the Fiji Government became the major shareholder in the milling organisation, and the secretaries became more militant. One to really
shake the tree was Apisai Tora. Perhaps one of the most colorful and enigmatic Fijian union and political leaders, he made headlines for over 50 years. Trade Unionism was his platform and in 1959 he was leader of a strike that led to the first civil riots in Suva. He flirted with communism and Islam and changed his name to Mohammed Tora. Jailed for arson and sedition, he also served for some years as a minister in the Alliance Government. While proclaiming his Fijian nationalism, he called for the expulsion of Indians from Fiji, yet he later joined forces with the Indian dominated National Federation Party.

At the time he was elected as General Secretary of the Union, his counterpart in the company was an unusual industrial manager, Gautam Ram Swarup. The son of a cane farmer, Swarup was typical of a brand of Indian who had grown up in a multi-racial rural environment, done well at school, gone on to study accountancy, furthered his studies in Australia, returned to take up a position as a chartered accountant, and saw himself not as an Indian, but as a Fiji citizen. He and Tora, although intrinsically different, found a great deal of common ground. They achieved settlement on issues that surprised many. Both were pragmatic men, and Gautam mixed forthrightness with a keen brand of Fiji humour. He teased and ridiculed Tora in a way that others could not and was not offended by Tora’s bluntness and aggressive manner.

While they were both in office, the three of us were sent to visit Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Guyana to study industrial relations in those sugar-producing countries. Tora had previously visited Cuba and had met Castro, and was very keen to make a diversion to Cuba to renew acquaintances. We had a hard time persuading him otherwise. In fact, throughout the trip we had a hard time keeping him politically correct. He wanted to get into the factories and stir up the workers and this upset the local managers. He was also a great philanderer. The trip was useful for us in a reverse kind of way. The Caribbean sugar industries were in such a deplorable condition that the main benefit of our trip was to learn what not to do. We returned with some valuable lessons and Tora was to admit that his union members were not so badly off.

When Rabuka mounted his coup in 1987, Tora was out of the union but was a strong Taukei (Indigenous) rights leader. Gautam was then Deputy General Manager of the Fiji Sugar Corporation. It was a very difficult time and the sugar industry struggled to keep going. Many Indian cane farmers refused to cut their cane. There were threats of sabotage in the factories. Armed soldiers set up camps and roadblocks all over the country. There were outbreaks of violence and the economy shuddered to a halt as investors withdrew their patronage. Gautam told me how, one day, as he was working in his office, a certain failed politician who had managed to be drafted into the military, stormed into his office. He was a grossly overweight part-European who, dressed in an ill-fitting
military uniform, looked like a comic character. This idiotic ‘soldier’ drew a pistol from his holster, slammed it down on Gautam’s desk and declared, ‘I am now going to watch over the sugar industry.’

On another occasion during this crisis, as I was sitting with Gautam in his office he said to me, ‘I am going through an identity crisis. For the first time in my life I am being forced to think of myself as an Indian.’ I understood his dilemma, for although I was officially labeled ‘European’ and had grown up in an elite environment, I detested the classification and refused to fill in forms that required me to state my race. I had no links to Europe, and, like Gautam, I never thought of myself in ethnic terms. I was a person from Fiji, a Fiji Islander, if you like. Fiji was my home. It was where my roots were sunk.

Because it was so politically advantageous to have some influence in the sugar industry, many failed politicians tried to restore their political reputations by getting a foothold. Chirag Ali Shah had been a staunch member of the National Federation Party before he lost his seat, just before elections for a new General Secretary of the Union. He stood and won simply because he had the gift of oration, even though he knew nothing about trade unionism or industrial relations. But he was a kindly man and I spent more time with him in his garden than in his factories. He had a real gift for raising bougainvillesas and his garden on the dry side of Western Viti Levu was a blaze of color. He never told me all his secrets, except that bougainvillesas need to be put under stress in a dry environment. Unfortunately I lived in the wet Eastern side of the island and I could never get them to flower like Chirag’s.

During my first year in the industry, the power was absolutely in the hands of management, but by the time I left, the balance had swung just as emphatically to the unions. During the last years of my service, by which time I was working as the Industrial Commissioner with the Sugar Industry Tribunal Office, the union was controlled by a highly skilled and experienced trade unionist named Felix Anthony. Felix had been a union leader in the aviation industry and was accustomed to talking very loudly to overcome the noise of aircraft engines. I didn’t know this at first, so was rather stunned at our first confrontation when I found him yelling at me and the company officials as though we were in a street brawl. Felix was young, energetic, and very intelligent. He had good debating skills and understood the complexities of the milling operations. In many respects, he had greater skills than the industrial managers in the company and he out-maneuvered them time and again. I had many long and tedious battles with Felix and, because of my concern that he was succeeding in swinging the pendulum too far towards the unions, I suggested to him that I could assist in getting him a scholarship to go overseas and study law. I really thought he would make a very good lawyer. But Felix had the bit between his teeth and was determined to maximise improvements in workers’ conditions. He too began
to balance his demands to ensure that the company could survive. Even the company began to see merit in his campaign. Just before I left office, I presided over a signing session with Felix and the other three General Secretaries and the company. We signed 25 agreements that were designed to ensure the long-term relationship between the employees and the company.

Felix was to become the pre-eminent trade unionist in the country when he took over from deposed Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry as General Secretary of the Fiji Trade Union Congress. He was an outspoken and fearless critic of the perpetrators of the 2000 coup while remaining head of the General Workers Union.

Another example of how things had changed between 1968, when I joined the industry, and 1999 when I left, occurred when a new manager was appointed to the large Lautoka sugar mill. When I first joined, the outgoing Secretary of the Sugar Board was a man name Rob Sulch. His reputation with the farmers had been tarnished to the point that the National Federation party newspaper Pacific Review called him Mr Slush. I knew this was a price to pay for being in a high profile, politicised industry. Before he left, Rob took me round to meet all the main players of the industry.

The manager of the Lautoka mill was Murray Aitkin, an Australian who had spent all his life in Fiji and an archetype of the CSR mill manager. Within his mill, in his locality and township of Lautoka, and among cane farmers, he was regarded as the supreme being. This kind of adulation gave him an enormous ego and sense of superiority. When I was first escorted into his enormous office, he remained seated behind his large wooden desk and throughout the time that Rob and I spent with him, despite the fact that I was the scion of one of the most influential copra planter families, he managed to make me feel like an insect to be trampled on.

When I went to pay my respects to the newly appointed Fijian manager of the Lautoka mill 30 years later, the contrast could not have been greater. Abele had worked his way up through the complex staff structure and the board believed that he had the skills to head up what was then one of the largest sugar mills in the Southern Hemisphere. He had many of the characteristic Fijian qualities that cause them to stand out above other races of people, including respect and humility. He manifested both of these when I went into his office for the first time after his appointment. He rose quickly from behind the same desk that Murray Aitkin used, came around to greet me, went briefly down on one knee, took one of my hands in both of his, and murmured, ‘Sa bula Saka’ (Hello Sir), before he switched into English and invited me to be seated. This act of
humility was not demeaning in any way, nor did it make me feel at all superior. It was simply the Fijian way, and it was such a refreshing contrast to the attitude of Murray Aitkin.

There is a certain irony in the fact that, over the past 50 years, it hasn’t been only the big businessmen, civil servants, politicians, traders and manufacturers who have sustained Fiji’s economic growth. The impetus has come from the humble cane farmer, who by extremely hard work and commitment increased cane production from two million tons to four-and-a-half million tons over 30 years. I spent a great deal of time over that period visiting many of the 20,000 farmers, dealing with their problems and listening to their views. Seventy-five per cent of the farmers were Indians, and the remainder Fijians. The Indians were mainly descendents of those who came to Fiji as indentured labourers to work for the CSR. They subsequently became tenant farmers on small ten-acre blocks of leasehold land. Even as recently as 1968, when I started in the industry, the farmer’s life was hard. Most of the homes were made of corrugated iron or bamboo.

They contained the bare necessities of life, drew water from wells, and few had electricity or cars. The price of cane was about $6 per ton. There wasn’t much margin for profit.

But these simple folk had a vision: to work hard, save, educate their children, and improve the quality of their lives. I watched that vision realised by many over the years. By the turn of the century there were solid concrete homes all over the cane areas and many farmers had cars, tractors and lorries. There were TV aerials on most rooftops. Farmers’ sons and daughters were the doctors, lawyers, teachers, dentists and political leaders of Fiji. They had sons and daughters in professional positions living in Australia, New Zealand and the USA. It helped that the price of cane had risen to $60 per ton, but costs had gone up proportionately, and they had to cope with the constant ravages of drought, floods and hurricanes.

Typical of the fighting spirit of farmers was Bechu Prasad. In 1984, at the age of 83, he could have expected a quiet and comfortable retirement. But in a few moments of cyclonic winds, his house, which he had built himself, was demolished. The treasured possessions and mementoes that remind an old man of his youth were scattered across the battered cane fields. But his concern was not for himself, despite the fact that he had to live in a tent. He went out to help government officials distribute food rations and assist other less resilient people restore their homes and their lives.

Bechu Prasad was the son of a mill employee who acquired some land and began farming. He had little education but developed a powerful work and
community ethic. Even at 83 he still went out at dawn to work the fields. He was fit and agile. His eyes were alert and sparkling with humour. A large white moustache covered his mouth. His speech was coherent and constructive. He wore a battered felt hat. Before his house was destroyed by the hurricane, he proudly displayed on its walls the Coronation Medal, the Certificate of Honour, appointment of Justice of the Peace, and the insignia of the Order of the British Empire. He was a committee member of the local school and Indian Advisory Council.

Another old-timer was Ram Kissum, a cane farmer at Rakiraki, on the north eastern part of Viti Levu. Like many others, he was the son of an indentured labourer. Years of lonely toil, years spent guiding his bullocks as they hauled his plough across the land, years spent planning and experimenting to balance inputs and outputs of the soil, turned him into a pensive and thoughtful man. He told me how he used to get up at four am and milk the cows and start work on the farm. He’d rest only a couple of times during the day and finished at eight o’clock at night. This would go on for six to seven days a week, depending on the weather. He hadn’t acquired many possessions after 50 years of farming but he told me proudly that while he had one son helping him on the farm, another lived in Vancouver, another in Sydney, two were headmasters of local schools, another was studying at Madras University, one daughter was married to a school teacher and another to a farmer. He would frequently say, ‘I haven’t wasted my life.’

Often the most contented men and women are those who are considered ‘average.’ Not those of genius level nor idiots; not millionaires nor paupers; not owners of vast estates nor pockets of poor land; not residents of mighty mansions nor of hovels; not overzealous workers nor loafers. These ‘average’ people have enough to live on without having to struggle and are not plagued by the social stress that often accompanies great wealth or poverty. They are usually happy. They are part of the great multitude who contribute tremendously to all aspects of life but are not easily recognised, for they don’t stand out above others.

Abdul Gafoor was typical of the ‘average’ cane farmer. He had an upright stance, a firm handshake and clear twinkling eyes. His face was fringed with a well-trimmed grey beard and he was seldom without his fez. The son of an indentured labourer, he started work at an early age, and found a quiet and fertile valley deep in the hills far from the Labasa sugar mill. He acquired a lease and began the backbreaking task of felling the virgin bush, working till late at night to turn it into a cane farm. It took him a long time but that valley is now covered with lush fields of emerald cane. The low land is terraced and planted in rice. Coconut trees surround the solid concrete home. An all-weather road meanders through the hills to the main access. He has a lorry to cart his cane. He was surrounded by a family who, like him, are devout Muslims. Despite never
having been to school he learnt to read the Koran and has been on his pilgrimage to Mecca. There was nothing really outstanding about Abdul Gafoor. He kept out of politics and never tried to command the spotlight. His life was his cane farm and his family. He was the solid core of the sugar industry.

Indian people from the subcontinent have had a centuries old tradition of farming land. Those who came to Fiji brought their skills with them and adjusted easily to the intensive nature of cane farming. Fijians, on the other hand, have only in recent times been introduced to the difficulties of intensive agriculture. They have been accustomed to planting small plots of taro, cassava, yams or yaqona. Cane farming requires hard work and discipline to the timely needs of planting, cultivation, fertilising and harvesting. Many Fijian farmers who started farms adjacent to successful Indians and learnt from them have been successful. But those who have been out on their own have not done so well.

George Cavalevu made his name as a rugby player. He was a brilliant winger who captained the Fiji team that trounced the mighty Maoris in 1951. The next year, he was the star of the team that toured Australia and he has always been rated as one of the greats of Fiji rugby. After rugby, he tried a number of vocations but never settled down till he had the offer of leasing 1,300 acres of land in the Ba valley. The qualities that made him a superb sportsman obviously acquitted him to be a good cane farmer. He quickly raised production to 500 tons, and ran 200 head of cattle, 50 pigs and 200 goats, as well as planting taro, cassava and yam. George became an example to other Fijians, demonstrating that they could succeed as cane farmers. But disaster struck him in the form of a devastating hurricane that wrecked his farm. During the height of the storm, as he was trying to salvage some of his possessions, he was knocked to the ground and a four-inch nail was driven through his knee. It was some time before he could be taken to the hospital where he was to spend many painful months. The leg was saved but it was left permanently stiff. George rebuilt his farm and became an eloquent spokesman for farmers. Some years later, I led a team of sugar industry men on a tour to study the industries in Mauritius, Kenya and India. George was part of that team and on all our flights we had to be sure he had an aisle seat for his stiff leg.

Another member of that team was Atunaisa Maitoga. Atu had been a captain in the military before joining the District Administration. He went into politics and won a seat by beating his own chief. Although he had fought hard to win, the moment of his success left him with a dilemma, so he apologised to his chief for beating him. Atu was a ramrod straight man who always dressed in a coat and tie despite the weather, and conducted himself with extreme dignity. After his victory he was a candidate for the role of Deputy Prime Minister, but this never eventuated.
While in Kenya, George, Atu and I walked along the shores of Lake Victoria, took off our shoes and waded into the tepid water. We did this for a particular reason. According to Fijian legend, the Fijian people came from Kenya and what is now Tanzania. There are many placenames and words that are the same in all three places. As George and Atu stood in the water of Lake Victoria they wondered if perhaps some ancestors in ancient times had done the same. It was a defining moment for them both.

Two hours drive along the Kings Road from Suva is the village of Matawailevu, whose name means 'the source of the big river.' The village is perched on the corner of a high ridge. As the road winds round a sharp bend, stretched out below is a small valley nestling in the bosom of the surrounding hills. This is the valley of Tova, which in English means 'the flat land.' It was also the home of one of Fiji’s most progressive cane farmers, Eparama Tarovia.

I told Eparama Tarovia that I would find my way to his home but he said, 'No, this is your first visit so I will meet you on the main road and show you the way.' This is the kind of gesture one would expect from a man who shows a refreshing blend of traditionalism and independence. His respect for Fijian custom was abundantly clear. Yaqona was served as soon as I arrived. Tabua (whale’s teeth) hung from the walls beside photos of the esteemed leaders, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and the Governor General. On another wall was a tableau of the last supper, a gift from his son, who was serving with the United Nations forces in Lebanon.

He was an avid believer in all Fijian customs and traditions—customs that are often a burden to Fijians and which can inhibit their commercial progress. But in his case, these customs have supplemented and enriched his life. Traditionalist as he was, he abandoned village communal life to take up farming on his 87-acre farm, which became one of the showplaces of his district. He went to a Methodist school before going on to study agriculture. There is not much that he doesn’t know about farming. Unlike many other Fijian farmers he did not learn from Indian neighbours, he taught them.

The government had recognised his achievements and appointed him to numerous committees and boards. The Fijian administration recognised him by appointing him to the Provincial Council. His family looked upon him with adulation and respect and the Queen made him a Member of the Order of the British Empire.

After spending some time looking all over his farm, he invited me back to his house for lunch. His family had prepared a magnificent spread. There was enough for 20 people. ‘I must apologise for this humble meal,’ he said in the typical Fijian manner of belittling their magnificent hospitality.
The cane farming community and those associated with cane farming make up about one quarter of the voters of Fiji. It is little wonder then that they have been so politicised. Every budding politician tried to win their favor in order to get elected to parliament. The Indian parties’ political strength has always been in the cane fields, and the poor farmers have been manipulated and pushed from pillar to post to satisfy the whims of ambitious politicians. Leaders have risen and fallen depending on the success of the promises they have made.

A leader of the Fijians in the Nadi district was Napolioni Dawai, the Tui Nadi. He was a non-conformist who paid homage to no one. He was condemned by many, feared by others, avoided by those who abhorred his brash, rude manners, and envied by those who saw him getting richer and richer. He attended the prestigious Queen Victoria School, an exclusively Fijians school, and joined the Fijian Affairs Office before serving in many different government departments where he was always found to be a misfit. He then joined the military and went to serve in Malaya, but when he was overlooked to attend an officer training course he left the army and became a magistrate. Then came the tourism boom and Ratu Napolioni successfully negotiated land leases for many of the large hotel developments in the west. In his own words, ‘I know how to handle these overseas developers and screw out the best conditions. I am abrupt and rude in a joking kind of way. I don’t beat about the bush or mince words.’ His own landowner unit became a shareholder in the prestigious hotels on Denarau Island and operated a fleet of taxis from the hotels.

It was easy to be cowed by Ratu Napolioni. He was an enormous man with a rather ferocious face and a loud gravelly voice. He projected an arrogant, supremely confident image and was never daunted by a situation nor a person’s reputation. He became a friend of Marlon Brando and visited him in Los Angeles. ‘You and I are alike,’ he once told Brando, ‘we keep many wives.’ Naturally, Dawai entered politics and became a senator. He was later elected to the House by the Alliance Party but he was never a party man and always followed his own agenda.

On one occasion, I took a five man, multi-racial group of sugar industry leaders to the first World Cane Farmers Conference in Guadalajara, Mexico. Two of the members were Swami Rudrananda and Ratu Napolioni. We sat down in the front row of a hall with some 800 delegates from the sugar world and made many interjections during discussion. Possibly because we were so multi-racial and objectively critical, or perhaps because of the impression that Ratu Napolioni and Swamiji made, the Chairman asked if I would propose the main resolution to come out of the meeting. At one stage, Swamiji wanted to make a statement and the Chairman invited him to go on stage and speak from the main podium. This entailed climbing a flight of ten steep steps, which was quite beyond the frail old Swami. Undaunted, Ratu Napolioni rose and gathered up the saffron clad old man in his arms, carried him up the steps, and gently placed him before
the podium. The delegates loved this show of devotion and applauded loudly. Dawai stood like a sentinel, arms akimbo, beside the Swami, as he delivered his statement. When he finished, he again gathered up the old man in his arms and carried him back to his seat.

On our return trip to Fiji, Air New Zealand kindly upgraded us all to first class. We were delighted but, regrettably, Ratu Napolioni took advantage of the gesture and became drunk and abusive to the crew and other passengers. It was my unfortunate duty to write a letter of apology to Air New Zealand when we returned to Suva.

Research scientists, particularly plant breeders, are often quiet backroom people of whom little is seen or heard. They tend to dabble quietly in their laboratories, peering into microscopes, testing, researching and meticulously recording their results. Perhaps a paper emerges from their work and mankind benefits in some small way from their tireless but largely unheralded endeavours.

Such a model does not fit former Fiji Sugar Corporation’s Research manager, Krishna Murti, a man who was certainly more highly lauded internationally than at home. Few Fiji people outside the sugar industry will have heard his name. Fewer still are aware of his significant achievements. But wherever one travels in the cane sugar world, be it Japan or Mauritius, India or Taiwan, Cuba or South Africa, the common denominator is always the same: Krishna Murti. He is internationally regarded as among the foremost cane breeders and his research papers are studied by scientists everywhere.

What brought Krishna Murti this fame?

Fundamentally it was because he was an extremely capable scientist. His first ambition was to study medicine, but he finally settled on marine biology and zoology and gained a gold medal at the University of Annamalai in Madras.

In 1960, when he returned to Fiji, he could not find employment and was told he was over-educated. Eventually he had to settle for a job as a humble chemist with the CSR at Lautoka Mill.

Fortunately, he came to the notice of Joe Daniels, himself an internationally regarded cane breeder, who was the Director of Agricultural Research.

These two began working together on a project to make wild canes flower out of season so that they could be crossed with noble canes to produce new genetic lines. They succeeded in developing a set of hybrids and this technique gave them a lead on cane breeders in other parts of the world.

The real problem faced by cane breeders was keeping pace with the expansionist policies of the industry. How could they breed new varieties fast enough?
Krishna Murti accepted this challenge and as a result achieved a scientific breakthrough that was to bring him international recognition.

He realised that the traditional method of breeding, by crossing male and female flowers and inducing new characteristics into the progeny, was far too slow. It took eight to ten years to develop a new variety in this way. Instead, he called upon his knowledge of medicine and cell biology to develop a revolutionary new technique of plant tissue culture. He placed slices of cane tissue in artificial mediums, to induce a callus formation, in which new plants regenerated very rapidly. In this way, he was able to introduce new characteristics and speed up the process of variety breeding. He presented his paper on this technique in 1974 and it immediately attracted attention from all around the world.

In Fiji he was able to develop a new commercial variety of cane known as Ono in the incredibly short span of five years. Many other varieties suitable for all types of land have since been developed.

But the benefits of this knowledge to Fiji have been more than just new varieties. Because of his reputation on the international scene, the doors of research institutes in cane-producing countries were opened to him. Exchange programmes on variety testing for diseases and pests were established between Fiji, India, Taiwan, Philippines, India, Bangladesh and Hawaii. He was invited to establish tissue culture labs in a number of countries and is regularly invited to speak at international forums.

In 1985, a partial industrial restructure took place with the scrapping of the Sugar Board and Sugar Advisory council. In their place a Sugar Commission, a Sugar Tribunal and, most importantly, a Sugar Cane Growers Council was set up. The latter was to give the growers more influence in the affairs of the industry. With this re-organisation, I became the Industrial Commissioner and the man chosen to be the Chairman of the Commission was Gerald Barrack.

Gerald served his apprenticeship in commerce. Extremely hard working and ambitious, with a talent for finances, Gerald became head of a number of prominent companies before he was asked to be the first head of the Commission by Prime Minister Ratu Mara. In this capacity, he was also chair of the sugar marketing company and the fertilizer organisation.

It accordingly fell on Gerald’s shoulders to drive the restructure. Throughout the early years of the new century, he battled on gamely. The stakeholders were fully aware of the critical urgency for action, yet the politicians continued to play their divisive games.

The expiry of native land leases and the failure to renew them to the sitting tenants, as well as the coups of 1987 and 2000, had serious impacts on the
sugar industry. Many skilled and experienced staff officers in the Fiji Sugar Corporation decided to migrate overseas and it was extremely difficult to find replacements. Likewise, many of the new generation of farmers left to join relatives already overseas and it was left to the old people to run the farms. The number of cane farmers dropped from 22,000 to 13,000. Efficiency in the mills deteriorated because of the lack of funds to carry out capital improvements. The costs of production rose. Production of cane fell from four million tons to under two million tons. Sugar output fell from 500,000 tons to 160,000 tons.

Experts from India were brought in to fix the mills, but they seemed to do more harm than good.

The industry structure that had been set up was dismantled and much of the drive for the industry was returned to the Fiji Sugar Corporation. Valiant efforts were made by the Corporation and government to turn things around and diversify the industry. But the reality was that the days of the industry as the economic backbone of Fiji had ended. The baton had been decisively passed to tourism.

But the sugar industry cannot be dismissed so lightly. It is embedded in the folklore of the country. I recall reflecting on a major sugar industry conference held in Nadi in 1980. The keynote speaker was the Prime Minister, Ratu Mara.

Tall and grey haired, Ratu Mara limped down the aisle with a somewhat uneasy smile fixed on his strong but tired face. Beside him was the independent Chairman Sir Ian Thompson, soon to be acting Governor General. These two men, one the nation’s leader, the other the nation’s sugar industry leader, holding jobs more prone than any other to public criticism, were two of the most popular and admired men in the country.

The Prime Minister gave an address that opened the 1980 Sugar Industry Conference.

But as he and other speakers discussed the future of sugar, as the conference unfolded, as the miller’s executive chatted informally with the cane farmer, the trade unionist with the cabinet minister, as the vice chairman of the world’s largest sugar broking house talked about sugar marketing prospects, as the chief executive of the sugar mill company talked blithely about a crop of four-and-a-half million tons of cane, what thoughts were passing through the minds of the delegates?

Perhaps Eric Jones, who would have to sell 500,000 tons of sugar that year, was reflecting on the growth of exports, way back to 1874, when a grand total of ten tons was shipped out.
What about Krishna Mudaliar of Rakiraki? Did he remember when the indenture system ended and the Penang Mill had to close down in 1923 and 1924?

When the general manager of the Native Land Trust Board spoke about land, no doubt many farmers recalled with pride that great occasion back in the 1920s when the Colonial Sugar Refining Company began the tenant farm system and they became independent farmers in their own right, and were able to say, ‘This farm belongs to me.’

Perhaps Viliame Rakoroi also remembered when his mataqali land reverted to him and he was able to join the sugar industry. Conversely James Shankar Singh may have remembered with bitterness the day when land that he had been farming reverted to Fijian reserve.

When George Moody-Stuart spoke about total Fiji hourly crushing capacity reaching 995 tons by 1982, did Arthur Ede, the last of the CSR engineering executives in Fiji, smile and recall that, in 1880, Penang Mill crushed a capacity of five tons of sugar per day?

When Akuila Savu spoke about the prospect for ethanol from cane juice, and Renton Righelato, research director of Tate & Lyle, expounded on sugar as a raw material for baker’s yeast, citric acid, vinegar and detergent, did Krishna Murti reflect nostalgically on his student days when research meant breeding new cane varieties?

When Prem Chand Seth, the outspoken representative of the lorry owners, erupted with criticism about the transport system, did he compare efficiency with the 1890s when river punts were used to deliver cane to Rarawai Mill?

What was running through the alert but aged mind of Swami Rudrananda, the saffron–robed Hindu monk, who for 50 years had been the vocal champion of cane farmers? Was he remembering his involvement in the strikes of 1943, the conflict over the cane contract in 1959, the arbitration by Lord Silsoe, and disagreement over acceptance of his contract, or perhaps his battles with the CSR, the Denning arbitration in 1969, and the departure of CSR?

Then there was Rasheed Ali, the dynamic young executive, soon to be head of the Fiji Sugar Corporation absorbing everything like a sponge. Did he feel somewhat awed at the prospect of assuming control of the vast milling organisation? Was he aware of the ghosts of the many CSR men who had preceded him?

What was the Prime Minister thinking about as he sat unobtrusively at the back of the hall, after giving his address? Was he wondering what would happen to his nation if industrial strife tore the industry asunder? Was he conscious that
the votes of the 100,000 people that the conference delegates represented could vote him in or out of office? Was he praying that tourism would grow so that the country would be less reliant on the capricious sugar industry?

What did the sugar broker from London think when he heard a farmer accuse the sugar company of continuing the CSR attitude of subjugating the farmers? Did he have doubts about our ability to supply the promised quota of sugar? Indeed, what did the humble farmer from Tavua think about having the opportunity of being able to question the vice-chairman of one of the world’s greatest sugar broking houses?

What was passing through the minds of trade union representatives in the hall when the President of the Sugar and General Workers Union introduced his traditional rival, the head of the Fijian Sugar Corporation? Were they astounded at his complimentary remarks?

But the big question in the minds of most people then and now was: how long could the sugar industry continue to sustain the economic growth and prosperity of Fiji.