16. Clubs

The Suva community is made up of many races and groups of people. Whenever one gave a public address, it was prefaced with recognition of the chief guest, perhaps the Prime Minister, then members of cabinet, followed by members of the diplomatic corps, and finally ladies and gentlemen. This, then, was the hierarchy of society. But the groupings of the ladies and gentlemen are extremely diverse. There are, of course, the racial groupings: Fijian, Indian, European, part-European, Tongan, Samoan, Solomon Islander, Rotuman, Chinese, and others.

The expatriates comprised a separate group. They came mainly from Australia, New Zealand, Britain, the United States and, more recently, South East Asia. These racial groups were then broken down into sub-groups of those working within church communities, the university, aid organisations and professions.

Even within the racial groups there were sub-groups. Within the Indian community there were Gujaratis, Muslims and South Indians. The old local Chinese felt different to recent immigrants of Chinese origin. There were, of course, countless overlaps within the civil service, in the professions and the business community. But on the whole most of these groups preferred to socialise among themselves. Needless to say, there were the rich and the poor, the middle class and the destitute. What was remarkable about this complex Suva society was that a great many people knew each other, or at least knew who people were, and most of the locals could speak Fijian, Hindi and English.

A great deal of the social and sporting life of Suva, and indeed Fiji, gravitated around clubs. At Savusavu, the copra producing centre on Vanua Levu, there was the Planters Club, a place where copra planters gathered when they went to town to make their purchases or sell their copra. It became a rather boisterous drinking hole for the hard-living Savusavu planters. At Labasa, there was the Vanua Levu Club, which was originally set up by CSR for their own staff. It was mainly a drinking and billiards club. In most of the small towns around the country there were similar clubs for the merchants living in the towns.

The Suva clubs were more diverse. The oldest was the Fiji Club, which had been established at the old capital of Levuka at the end of the 19th century. My great-grandfather was an original member. When the capital moved to Suva, the club was moved. According to its constitution, it was ‘for the intercourse of gentlemen,’ a term that would certainly not be used in any constitution today. During the colonial days, only British civil servants were eligible for membership. Even successful businessmen were disqualified from membership. They were regarded as ‘mere merchants.’ As for the ‘natives’ and Indians, the
British thought that giving them membership was unthinkable. As Fiji changed, so did the clubs. But old traditions die hard, and when Gautam Ram Swarup was proposed as President in the 1980s there was a hard core of whites who saw this as a most retrograde step. But he won and managed to appease the different interest groups. The club offered tennis, swimming, squash and billiards as well as many social events.

Just down the road was the Defence Club, which was patronised mainly by commercial men. As its name suggests, a constitutional requirement was that all members had to respond to defend Fiji if the need arose. Its members were a hard drinking lot and I always wondered about the effectiveness of any defence they may be able to offer.

There was also the Merchants Club, which served the needs of Indian merchants, and the United Club, which had a strong part-European membership.

On the outskirts of Suva was the Golf Club. It was originally a white’s only establishment but as golf became more popular with local people it expanded its membership. Saturday was competition day. A draw was posted on the board and you might find yourself drawn with an Australian professor, an Indian fitter and turner from the Public Works Department, and a Fijian salesman. On the golf course, one was judged not by position, race or wealth. What mattered was one’s ability to drive or putt. It was always stimulating to spend four hours walking the course with people one had never met before. During the terribly stressful days after the 1987 military coup, it was one of the few places of sanity in the city. Suva was rife with rumours and rocked by tragic events. It was very difficult to concentrate on work. One did not know who to trust or believe. Invariably, golfers of all races and walks of life would find their way out to the course after work to play a round of golf and forget their problems.

The other main club in Suva was the Yacht Club. This was where the yachties and ‘stink boat’ owners moored their boats and drank vast quantities of beer. In the 20th century, it was more of a white establishment, as few Fijians or Indians had boats. Many expatriates who were on short term contracts bought boats to take advantage of the wonderful opportunities while they were in Suva. In the 1960s and 1970s, sailing was very popular and Suva harbor was a busy place on Saturdays and Sundays when regattas took place.

When we came to Suva, I joined the power boat owners and acquired a 15-footer. In those days, most of us went to the island of Nukulau for our boating activities and picnics. It was so popular that unless you arrived at the island by eleven o’clock, there would not be a mooring space around the beach.
With the increased cost of fuel in the 1980s and 1990s, power boating became less popular and by the time Nukulau was made into a prison island for George Speight and his treasonous supporters, it was rarely used.

One of the main events in the boating calendar was the Suva to Levuka boat race. This was a time trial that started at the Yacht Club, went across Laucaela Bay, through the river system to Bau water on the eastern side of the island, then across to the island of Ovalau and its capital, Levuka. There were normally 40 or 50 boats in the race, which took a full day to complete, depending on the speed you declared. There were secret check points along the way, to ensure that you passed that point at a time calculated by the organisers to be correct based on your declared speed. If you were too fast or too slow you lost points. The team with the least penalties won. There was always a great deal of drinking along the way and the highlight was the prize-giving night. In the beginning, the final night was held at the Levuka Club, but it was later staged at a beautiful, isolated island, back in Bau water. Needless to say, many of the boaters became outrageously drunk and suffered next day on the trip back to Suva.

My first success in the race was with my cousin Spencer. He was the Captain and I was the navigator. We entered at a speed of 26 knots, which was the fastest time, and we crossed the line first with a minimal loss of points. However, another owner had entered at the slowest time of 5 knots and he lost fewer points. We ended up second. I had more luck with Ray Nestor. Ray and his family came to Suva from the heartland of Victoria. He was a dinky-di Aussie, a land surveyor who was contracted to the Fiji Government. His children went to Stella Maris school with our children, but it was our mutual love of the sea that brought us together. Ray decided to build his own boat while he was in Fiji. This proved to be a fine 25-foot craft, which was duly entered in the Suva Levuka race. With Ray as skipper and myself as navigator, we maintained our speed of 18 knots and won.

Service clubs such as Rotary and Lions were well patronised in Fiji. These service organisations were non-racial and did a tremendous amount of good in the community. Rotary had first started when the Suva Club was chartered in 1936. It was followed by clubs in Lautoka, Ba, Sigatoka and Labasa. In 1972, I was invited to join a new club that was chartered in Suva. The Rotary world is divided up into districts that are controlled by District Governors. In Fiji we were part of the then largest district in the world, which included the north of the North Island of New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, New Caledonia, Norfolk, Vanuatu and Cook Islands. The district headquarters were in Auckland and the governors had been New Zealanders until 1974, when Ali Asgar, a Fiji optometrist, was appointed to the position. Ali Asgar was an exceptional man who came from the farming community of Ba. His parents sent him to study optometry overseas and he returned to open a practice in Suva. Ali was an
extrovert with a dazzling sense of humour, self-assurance and was always full of optimism. Premature baldness didn’t age his baby face with its twinkling eye and constant smile. While Ali had served as a World Vice-President of J. C.’s, to take up the appointment of District Governor meant a big sacrifice, for as Governor he would have to be away visiting all the clubs in the district for at least six months of the year. His practice would certainly suffer. He took great pleasure in pointing this out to me when he asked me to be his District Secretary, which entailed the administration of the district.

I would have to make as many sacrifices as he would, he teased. We had a great year together and staged one of the most successful district conferences ever held. Some 600 Rotarians from all over the district came to Suva for the annual gathering. Our conference organiser was Kalyan Ghose, the manager of Air India in Fiji. Kalyan Ghose was from Goa and spent many years being a good citizen of Fiji. He spoke the English language so beautifully that someone once remarked that ‘he made the Queen sound like an Australian ocker.’

I never thought of Ali as vain, so was surprised when one day I saw him with a toupee covering his bald dome. He looked quite different and so artificial that I laughed. But he laughed as well and I eventually got used to it and found it difficult to imagine him without his extra hair. Tragically, Ali died before he was 50 and it was many years before we had another District Governor from outside New Zealand. I have always found the New Zealand Rotarians rather patronising towards the islanders. There seems to be a notion that they are better qualified and that we should conform to their concept of how Rotary should fulfill its objectives. The truth is that islanders are different and many organisations, including business and political organisations, must be moulded to suit their needs. A classic example of this is the application of democracy. Following the coups of 1987, 2000 and 2006, smart sanctions were imposed by New Zealand and other countries ‘until Fiji returned to democracy.’ Which meant, of course, their brand of democracy, rather than one that could be moulded to suit Fiji.

There were many different sporting clubs, which I refer to elsewhere. There were also clubs such as Charman’s All Races. Harry Charman was a Londoner, a real cockney, who loved to wear a pearly suit. He came to Fiji as a physical training specialist and set up his club mainly for boxing. But his main contribution was to encourage young men, who often drifted aimlessly around the streets, to join and discover some focus in life. Harry became a kind of folk hero among people of all races and strata of society.

While there was plenty of opportunity for Fijians and Indians to express their artistic talents of song and dance, the Fiji Arts Club was the only place where Western stage productions could be seen. The club attracted many very talented
expatriates who produced Shakespearean plays and the top shows of the day, such as *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Canterbury Tales*. Later, when local playwrights emerged, their productions were successfully put on display.

Nightclubs did not become popular until the 1970s and 1980s. Up until that time entertainment took place in the home. There were few local musicians and young people did not have spare money. One of the first nightclubs was the Golden Dragon. It was started by a very musical Chinese man and soon began to draw crowds. A group of us once decided to try it out. Within our party were Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau and his lovely wife, Adi Laisa. There were also many other people of all races and social backgrounds dancing and singing with the band. Fijians are a gregarious people, but they are also very respectful of their chiefs. I recall that at one point during the night, a young Fijian man came up to Ratu Penaia, bowed his head and asked very respectfully if he could dance with my wife, Jacque. Ratu Penaia examined him carefully before apparently deciding that the young man wasn’t a suitable companion for my wife. He simply pursed his lips and shook his head and the young man thanked him respectfully and walked away. Jacque and I were not consulted.