21. Women: The Real Mother Lode

There is an enormous talent in Fiji that is grossly underutilised: women. Considering the fact that Fijian culture is very male dominated, this is perhaps not surprising. The male is considered to be the protector and provider. Traditional parents are overjoyed to have sons. To have daughters is of concern and is sometimes a stigma. A woman who produces male children considers herself far more secure than one who produces girls. They often feel ashamed.

At least that was the attitude, and may still be in the more isolated rural Fijian villages. But times have changed, particularly for those who have moved to urban areas. To a large extent, the welfare of the urban family now depends on the support and resourcefulness of female members. Though not always in the forefront of decision making, they are influential behind the scenes.

There is much less male dominance in Indian culture where women seem to play a more influential role in decision making and in business.

So why are women not more influential? It is not because of a lack of talent but rather a macho attitude that still dominates in government and business. Very few women are ever appointed to the boards of statutory bodies or higher positions in the civil service. Women are not appointed to the boards of commercial organisations or given executive positions.

Yet, in the professions, they excel. In accounting firms, legal bodies, academia, medicine and teaching, women are at the top. They are the drivers. They also have a very strong presence in activist NGOs.

Two such women are Imrana Jalal and Shamima Ali. I was co-editor of the publication 20th Century Fiji: The People Who Shaped the Nation, where it was stated, ‘Imrana Jalal and Shamima Ali are now virtually synonymous with womens’ rights in Fiji. Through their consistent and skillful use of the media over the last 20 years, each woman has contributed profoundly to reshaping the consciousness of the nation about womens’ issues. Their organisations have become important resources for women across the spectrum of race, class, religion and generation in Fiji.’

Because Imrana was so outspoken about women’s issues during the early years of the Bainimarama government, her life was made very difficult and she was forced to leave Fiji and work overseas. But Shamima, still a powerful activist, has stayed on and plays a dominant role in women’s affairs.

Another woman to be included in the above mentioned publication was Taufa Vakatale, who, as a teacher, was the first Fijian principal of Adi Cakobau School,
a prestigious Fijian girls' school. But that was only the beginning. She was also the first Fijian woman to be Deputy High Commissioner in an overseas mission; first to be Permanent Secretary; first Fijian woman Cabinet minister; first Deputy Prime Minister, and first Acting Prime Minister. She was a real trailblazer.

An Indian woman who made a significant impact on politics in Fiji was Irene Jai Narayan. She began life as a teacher but switched to politics and, as a member of the National Federation Party, she was the only Indian woman elected to parliament in 1963, 1969, 1972, 1977 and 1982. After the 1987 coup, she joined the Transitional Government of Sitiveni Rabuka, which lasted until 1992, and then served as a Senator till 1999. She was a very dynamic and admired woman.

Another of the strong Fijian women of the 20th century was the wife of the late Prime Minister, Ratu Mara. Adi Lala was in fact a higher chief than her husband. She ruled as the Roko Tui Dreketi. But despite this high chiefly rank, with which she exercised considerable influence, and the fact that she was the Prime Minister’s wife, she always conducted herself in a Vakaturaga way, that is to say, with dignity, respect and humility. Despite being a large woman, she had impressive grace and style.

When she died she was succeeded as Roko Tui Dreketi by her sister, Adi Teimumu Kepa, who after the 2014 general elections became the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament.

Though married to a prominent High Court judge, Adi Teimumu was respected in her own right. She became an outspoken critic of the Bainimarama government, and, I am sure, would have been arrested but for her status and the fact that she had right on her side. She became a strong leader for her province and is surely destined for greater things.

Throughout my 30 years in the sugar industry, Fiji’s largest employer, no woman was ever appointed to a senior position. They were only secretaries. On the 22,000 cane farms, only men were registered as owners. It was a sad indictment of the attitude of the time. However, there was Mrs Bhanmati Lekhram. Farmers’ wives usually took care of the house and the children and helped out on the farm when extra hands were needed. Bhanmati did all these things. But she also ran the farm, as her husband had given her power of attorney to control its affairs. It was not that he was subservient to her. Rather, he recognised that the family affairs were safer in her hands. ‘We have the Queen and Mrs Gandhi, why not Mrs Lekhram,’ she once said to me. She was a very strong and vivacious person who joked and teased and expressed her opinions without fear. Although she helped out on the farm, she was always well groomed. Being such an extrovert,
it was natural that she should stand for parliament (when she was 8 months pregnant, no less) and win. She also served on many sugar industry committees and was a constant thorn in the side of the milling company officials.

Although women were not prominent in executive and management positions, as far as the tourist industry was concerned, they were the face of Fiji. Tourists first met the warm, smiling and polite Fiji women on Air Pacific flights. In the many hotels, women were out front, at reception desks, in dining rooms, caring for children and performing traditional dances. When the tourists went home, they remembered the wonderful women of Fiji.

One of the premium events of the Suva calendar is the Hibiscus Festival, part of which involves choosing a Miss Hibiscus. This is a most sought after crown and it brings the young women of Fiji to the forefront. Those selected often progress rapidly in their chosen careers. The selection is not just about physical beauty, but also about poise, personality and intelligence.

One of the most iconic photographs ever taken in Fiji shows a tiny but supremely confident three-year-old Fijian girl in full traditional dress presenting a bouquet of flowers to a young, smiling Queen Elizabeth at the Suva wharf on a bright sunny day in 1953. Despite the passage of time, this picture has never faded from my memory, nor, I am sure, from the minds of the thousands of others who remember that occasion of Her Majesty’s first visit to Fiji.

That little girl was Adi Mei Kainona, eldest daughter of Adi Laisa and one of Fiji’s most distinguished Turagas—Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, who was Tui Cakau, Governor General, and the first President of Fiji.

Adi Mei was born while Ratu Penaia was serving as District Officer Labasa. But Adi Laisa went to Taveuni for the birth so that Ratu Penaia’s people could care for his first born.

Because Ratu Penaia was on regular postings around Fiji, Adi Mei was sent to live with relatives at Navua. This veivakamenemenei custom was not unusual, for it allowed for the pampering of the first born—a means of instilling an independent nature into the child. Indeed, throughout her life Adi Mei was to display a strong and independent spirit.

This was detected early in her life by another of Fiji’s great Turagas, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, when he took her into his household and tutored her for presentation to the Queen. Adi Mei told me, and I quote her words, ‘In all our rehearsals he took the part of the Queen and to me he was no less a personage than a king. He was chief just like Ratu but he had a different aura about him that is hard to explain.’

She never referred to Ratu Penaia as dad or father. To her it was always Ratu.
Ratu Sukuna’s influence on her was profound and one aspect of his teaching stayed with her all her life. This was vakakusakusavakamalua: being patient and tolerant. This helped her in all her dealings with rural women, for she had the patience to sit with them and guide them quietly in a right direction, while at the same time listening to their points of view.

Adi Mei went to Adi Cakobau School and then Epsom Grammar School in Auckland.

She had a great respect for the Vanua and the associated protocols. She was a traditional and decisive leader who had a passion for community work and particularly for the welfare of rural Fijian women. She was a stickler for high standards and the quality of the handicrafts that were produced by the rural women.

Adi Mei spent much of her working life at the Fiji Broadcasting Commission for she believed that through the radio she could reach out and touch the hearts of rural women. She attended Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women meetings in Nairobi and Beijing, and many Associated Country Women of the World gatherings all over the world. She was a fantastic Ambassador for Fiji and Fijian women.

In 1993, I was given the honour and privilege of writing Ratu Sir Penaia’s biography. By then, sadly, Adi Laisa had passed on. Ratu Penaia was then the President. One of my main sources of information was Adi Mei. She was Ratu Penaia’s constant companion—his confidante. She took Adi Laisa’s place at Government House and was a most gracious hostess.

She told me a great deal about Ratu Penaia and his life. When he was serving as Deputy Secretary for Fijian Affairs, he went on a visit to Vatulele and while going ashore in a dinghy at night a huge wave capsized the boat. Ratu Penaia managed to cling to the keel of the boat for some hours before he was washed ashore. That same night, a lady of Cakaudrove gave birth to a son and she was so relieved to know that no misfortune had befallen Ratu Penaia that she gave her son a long Fijian name, which, when translated, means ‘The Deputy Secretary for Fijian Affairs swam ashore safely after a wave capsized his boat at Vatulele.’ That was the boy’s name. I remember Adi Mei laughing her head off when she told me that story.

Adi Mei had three children and was a kind and generous person who always had time for the bubus (grandmothers) and others in need. She was a Marama of high standing, yet one with the common touch. Throughout her life she epitomised the chiefly characteristics of Vakarogorogo.
During the 1960s and 1970s, Lavinia Ah Koy was the Clerk to Parliament. This may not sound like a very important position, but it was equivalent to being the CEO. The Speaker may have been the President, but it was Lavinia who was the real boss. She was a complete authority on all aspects of parliamentary procedure, and even though she was a quietly spoken, extremely polite person, she ruled the parliamentary precincts with a rod of iron. No member of parliament, no matter how large his or her ego, argued with Lavinia. She was the respected public face of parliament.

Within the medical profession, a number of women have made their mark. But it is the nurses who have won the hearts of so many patients. Always gentle, caring and efficient, it is as though nursing is their natural role in life.

One very unusual nurse is Mere Samisoni. After serving in her chosen profession for many years, Mere saw an opportunity in business. Breadmaking was traditionally in the hands of small Chinese bakers, until Mere introduced the Hot Bread Kitchen. She set up bakeries and retail shops all over Fiji making quality bread. The business was a huge success and she became quite a force in commerce. But Mere had greater ambitions. She aimed to be a political leader and was elected to parliament, where she served with distinction. She had very strong views and naturally came into conflict with the Bainimarama Government.

Few women have excelled in sports. Indeed, there have never been many opportunities. Rugby and football are so dominant that women’s sports such as basketball, hockey and softball do not attract much attention.

The church is also a male-dominated arena. While the women may do most of the hard work in organising church activities, and their choir singing is outstanding, very few women became preachers, or pastors or leaders in any church denomination.

When the YWCA was set up in Fiji in 1962, one of the founders was Amelia Rokotuivuna, a woman who was destined to significantly change attitudes about women in Fiji. Born in very humble circumstances at the Vatukoula Gold Mines, it did not take her long to make her mark. She became Head Girl at the prestigious Adi Cakobau School, before taking on the role of pioneer feminist. As Executive Director of the YWCA, she brought together like-minded people of all races, and fearlessly addressed women’s rights, workers rights and political justice with great passion. Her activities brought her into conflict with political leaders of the time but her moral conviction about the need for change never wavered. She also fought vigorously against nuclear testing in the Pacific and must be given some credit for the cessation of tests.
So, to the question—to what extent do women, the other half of the population, impact on Fiji?

They are without doubt an extremely valuable natural resource. Like a gold mine which has been only partially worked, where the real lode is yet to be exposed. In time, the golden resources of women will be brought to the surface and they will make Fiji a very rich country.