



OUTCASTS OF THE PACIFIC

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On Friday 19 May, Fiji once again felt the cruel hand of racism grip the island nation as it laboured to build fragile structures of social cohesion. Once again there have been calls in the streets of Suva to ‘send the Indians back home’. As the hooligan element rioted in the streets, looting shops and burning property, the spirit of Indo-Fijians was broken again. Their home, their businesses, their very being felt threatened.

To them, this was another betrayal in a long line of betrayals through a history which saw the British colonisers bring Indians to Fiji as labourers, then abandon them without proper provision for land ownership or political inclusion.

Coup leader George Speight has told the world his actions are designed to protect indigenous Fijian interests against the ambitious Indians. We may as well be watching the events of 1987 when then coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka gave similar reasons for his actions after the Indian-dominated Labour Party came into power.

The news of this third coup in 12 years fills me with an overwhelming sorrow. The coups have forced many fourth- and fifth-generation Indo-Fijians like myself, who have never been to India, nor feel any kinship with that country, to look at our roots in an effort to understand why the Indian presence is so resented in Fiji.

How did we become the outcasts of the Pacific? Where do we belong?

The words of Indo-Fijian poet Dr Sudesh Mishra come to mind: ‘The system, as it has been passed through the British and now taken over by

the elite Fijians, has never actually allowed us to say that this particular grain of soil is yours, that you belong to it, that you can actually plant roots. So there is a kind of airiness between the earth and the feet for the Indo-Fijian.'

The feeling that Indians are the outsiders has been etched in the psyche of many indigenous Fijians through the nation's political processes and social structures.

I grew up in a racially mixed neighbourhood in the town of Nausori, 14 kilometres from Suva. During the festive seasons we shared foods and gifts with our Fijian neighbours or taught them how to make roti.

I was confronted by my 'otherness' one warm Sunday afternoon as I worked in the garden with my mother. A Fijian girl who had recently moved into the neighbourhood approached us and pointing to our house told my mother, 'Hey, kai India [Indian], one day I will live in that house'.

My mother was enraged by this affront. As an eight year old, I hoped that we would not have to leave because I liked my home, a rambling old bungalow which once housed expatriate managers working for the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR).

After the 1987 coups, I began to read the history of Indians in Fiji. Slowly bits of information that had filtered in while listening as a child to my father's conversations became insights into a bigger picture.

The threat of the Indians undermining Fijian interests has been used throughout the colonial period to keep a check on Indian aspirations and to gain support of Fijian chiefs. The most anti-Indian ideas and attitudes in Fiji came from the Europeans. Whenever there was a need to control either Indian labour or Indian demands for political representation, the Europeans would bring up the greater right of Fijians.

The colonial government encouraged racially segregated schools, and prohibited Fijians from going near Indian settlements, prompting the two groups to see each other through a prism of prejudice and stereotype.

The practice of appealing to one race against the other to win votes later became the mainstay of political campaigning. When Rabuka seized

power in 1987, the first thing he did was to separate the Fijian Ministers from their Indian colleagues. Speight has repeated this formula.

Neither Fijians nor Indians had any say in the matter of bringing Indian labour to Fiji. Britain ruled both countries. Fiji's first governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, saw it as a necessary condition of preserving Fijian interests. Indians would wear the responsibility of farming and labouring in Fiji, and thus save the Fijian race from colonial exploitation and even extinction. Between 1879 and 1916, more than 60,000 Indians were brought to Fiji as indentured labourers. With every 100 men came 40 women. a disproportion which would become the cause of major social upheaval in the plantation lines.

Among those thousands of souls separated from their homeland and loved ones were my great-grandparents. Enticed by promises of good pay and easy work to a land of plenty, instead they arrived in a land of fierce warriors, relentless hard labour and unrelenting sahibs, many of whom spoke with their whips and their boots.

Here their future became inextricably tied to the profits of white planters and to a powerful Australian company, CSR, an entity as powerful as the government of the colony. The Indians had a deep distrust of CSR and regarded it as the tyrant against whom they were to wage many battles.

After the Indians served their five-year labour they could pay their own passage back to India or stay in Fiji, or they could serve another five years and get a free passage back home. Many could not endure another five years of hard labour nor had the money to pay for their passage so chose to stay. Others had become estranged from their families in India and were forging new friendships in Fiji which had now become home.

As descendants of these labourers, Indians have continued to farm the same land over three or four generations leased from the indigenous Fijians, who own more than 90 per cent of the land in Fiji. Indians make up 43 per cent of the population but own less than 2 per cent of the land.

Despite the sacrifices of our forefathers, new generations of Indo-Fijians realise with sorrow that we may never be allowed to adopt Fiji as

our own. The national memory of Fiji has a convenient amnesia when it comes to Indian history and the community's contribution to the nation's development.

So what becomes of a people who are treated as resident aliens in their own homeland? How do we cope with this instability?

When people are denied the privilege of calling their homeland 'home', denied roots, then they begin to look outwards to other possible landscapes where they can actually plant roots. Thousands of Indo-Fijians have migrated to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, a mass exodus taking place after the 1987 coup. No doubt another one will follow the present coup.

Like those Indo-Fijians, I also left Fiji about 20 years ago in pursuit of education. Ironically, I have kept my Fijian citizenship through the turbulent times in Fiji's politics, always hopeful that one day I may return home. But that is beginning to look highly unlikely.

It is easy to see why Fijians are endearing to Westerners. They are animated, they smile and laugh more easily. The Indians seem more withdrawn, inhibited, and don't smile as easily. The strangeness of two such vastly different cultures living in one land is painfully plain to a visitor. We are two very different people.

Yet, I believe that it is the common people in Fiji, both Indians and Fijians, who have contained an eruption of bloodshed in the streets after the coups, not the police or the army. Despite the resentment, there remains a basic decency and goodwill amongst the people in Fiji towards each other.

I have often pondered about the place called home. Home is not a place where we can be arbitrarily told to belong or not belong. Home is that favourite tree in the schoolyard, or that bend in the river, or that lonely hill beyond — places of our childhood deeply etched in the memory. Chiefs and coup leaders in Fiji may tell the world Indians don't belong in Fiji, but we know that Fiji belongs to us.