

THE 'GHOSTLY SMELL' OF INDIAN COOLIES TOO STRONG FOR SPEIGHT

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In a cruel twist of irony, George Speight and his band of racist and criminal henchmen, are clamouring for freedom from their temporary prison on Nukulau Island, a popular picnic spot outside the capital Suva.

The island is, ironically, a former departure point to Fiji's sugar fields for Indian coolies, the ancestors of deposed Prime Minister Mahendra Pal Chaudhry and other Indo-Fijians, whom Speight removed from power at the point of a gun because they, according to him, 'smelled' differently from the native Fijians.

George Speight, like Sitiveni Rabuka before him, cut short the tortuous journey of Indo-Fijians from plantation to parliament for the second time in their history in Fiji. As Speight and his racist storm-troopers complain of ill-treatment on the island, the memories of the harsh indenture days linger on in the Indo-Fijian minds. As one Indian labourer, who arrived on Nukulau Island in 1911, recalled: 'When we arrived in Fiji we were herded into a punt like pigs and taken to Nukulau where we stayed for a fortnight. We were given rice full of worms and kept and fed like animals. Later we were separated into groups for various employers to choose who they wanted. We got to Navua and were given a three-legged pot, a large spoon, and some rice. We then went to Nakaulevu where we saw the sugar lines.'

Even the Indian indentured women, who began arriving in Fiji from 1879 onwards, did not escape the yoke of slavery. According to

Miss Hannah Dudley of the Fiji Methodist Mission: 'They arrive in this country timid, fearful women, not knowing where they are to be sent. They are allotted to plantations like so many dumb animals. If they do not perform their work satisfactorily they are struck or fined, or sent to goal. The life on the plantations alters their demeanour and even their very faces. Some look crushed and broken-hearted, others sullen, others hard and evil. I shall never forget the first time I saw indentured women when they were returning from their day's work. The look on those women's faces haunts me.'

One hundred and twenty-one years later, the ancestors of these coolies are still being hunted, terrorised, brutalised, and some Indo-Fijian women even reportedly raped in Speight's new Fiji for the Fijians. The only difference is that from 1879 to 1920, when the indenture system came to an end, the violence and brutality were meted out by the white planters.

Today, they are being meted out by their new Fijian masters, beginning with Sitiveni Rabuka's racist coups of 1987, which unleashed the racist Frankenstein — George Speight — who is a product of European and Fijian ancestry, the so-called 'Marginal Man' in Fijian society.

One can but only express pity at the frailty of yesterday's so-called Mr Strongman. The Indian coolies endured nearly half a century of harsh treatment on their way to the various plantations from Nukulau Island. The late Australian historian K.L. Gillion, in his study of Indians in Fiji, concluded that their history would show how they 'continued to adapt to the land to which their great grandparents came under such unhappy circumstances'. If they were not yet Fijians, they were certainly Fiji-Indians. For the Indo-Fijians, the coups of May 1987, and now the attempted coup of 2000, that ousted their representatives from Parliament have arrested their painful progress from Nukulau Island to Fiji's national Parliament.

Their history, however, will record that their own displacement from British India in 1879 prevented the dispossession of the Fijian in colonial Fiji following the Deed of Cession in 1874. Indeed, ironically, the indentured Indian was uprooted specifically to prevent the disintegration of the Fijian way of life.

In 1978, Dr Satendra Nandan, the poet/academic who was among those seized in Parliament on 14 May 1987, had reminded the nation: 'It is interesting to speculate if this peasant labourer had not come to Fiji at a critical time, not only the Fijian way of life but many island communities in the South Pacific would have been disrupted and perhaps permanently dislocated. The planters needed labour, the British government wanted economic viability for political stability, and it is anyone's guess what they would have done to achieve this. Thus the displacement of the Indian prevented the dispossession of the Fijian. This may be the lasting and most significant contribution of the peasants from India. Without this the Fijian might have lost much of his land, and more tragically, his self-respect.'

Earlier, I referred to George Speight as the 'Marginal Man' in Fiji society, a phrase borrowed from an article by Harry M. Chambers entitled 'The Marginal Man in Fiji Society: Cultural Advantage or Dilemma'. Chambers noted that a marginal man is a person of mixed cultural heritage, obtained by way of marriage or as a result of sexual relations between ancestors of different cultural heritage. The Marginal Man is sometimes classified as a 'half-caste'.

In Fiji society, he is called Part-European. Chambers noted that the greatest advantage of being a marginal man in Fiji is that one has insight into more than one culture, and has the opportunity of bringing out the best parts of each culture he is a part of and combining them to suit himself. He has more choice than most people have. Above all, a marginal man can also mix more easily with members of a culture altogether separate from the one he has the greatest insight into, because he understands more and, thus, is able to mix with people on their own terms.

In Speight's case, he has failed all the peoples of Fiji; his European ancestry for disregarding the rule of law and parliamentary democracy; the Fijian ancestry for the way he treated the Great Council of Chiefs, and his fellow Indo-Fijians with his rabid racist pronouncements.

Unfortunately, if there is any community in Fiji that can truly claim to be Fijian constitutionally, it is the Indo-Fijians, for as Chambers has pointed

out, in Fiji society, biological half-castes were present long before European contact, resulting from the high frequency of Melanesian-Polynesian and, especially, Tongan-Fijian interaction and intermarriage.

Above all, Speight's detention on Nukulau Island should remind him of John Donne's immortal words: 'No Man Is An Island'.

In conclusion, as George Speight and his men of terror and violence ponder their Waterloo on 'Nukultraz Island', it is to be sincerely hoped that they will, if and when they are finally released from Nukulau, carry with them the spirit of the Indian coolies before them, who went on to give us a Garden of Eden, and not a racist 'Satan's Paradise' which Speight and Associates have turned Fiji into in the 21st century.