

Chapter 1: Retrospect

We have the Indians here and we want to make the best of it. We are the Colony, not the Indians.

Sir Henry Marks, 1927

A.D. Patel arrived in Fiji on 11 October 1928. By then, Fiji had been a colony of Great Britain for exactly 54 years, its social, economic and political structures determined by a series of decisions taken in the last quarter of the 19th century. Patel and others like him would spend the next 40 years battling the system, trying to dismantle the foundations of a closed, racially compartmentalised colonial order. The task was fraught, for with the assistance of powerful entrenched interests in Fiji's plural society, the colonial government was often able to arrest or stifle any change that it did not authorise itself or which threatened the status quo.

For this purpose, it drew upon a large and well-tested arsenal of punitive tactics used by the colonial powers at different times throughout the world. These included, among others, the inculcation of fear, intimidation, arbitrary exercise of power, exile, divide and rule, and a variety of rewards for working within the system. In Fiji, as elsewhere, colonialism was ultimately about control, over people and over resources. To challenge the authority and legitimacy of the colonial order, then, was to undertake a daunting task fraught with potentially disastrous consequences. It was an unequal and unenviable contest; working within the system was more lucrative and rewarding than opposing it. This book is about the vision and work of one man, who also embodied the aspirations of many in his community and the country at large. In broad terms, this is the story of a counter-colonial project of the type mounted by nationalist leaders in former colonies of the European powers in Africa and Asia. In these places, the nationalist leaders triumphed, albeit after a period of long struggle, and were handed the reins of power when the imperialists departed. In Fiji, the nationalists and all those who opposed established ways of doing things were castigated and consigned to the margins. To understand the situation as it existed when A.D. Patel arrived in Fiji, it is necessary to look at the formative years of modern Fiji, both for background as well as for context.

The modern history of Fiji begins on 10 October 1874 when Fiji became a British Crown colony.¹ This historic event itself was the culmination of a series of developments going back to the early years of the 19th century, when sustained

¹ The literature here is vast, but the following provide a good guide to the literature: Derrick, 1951; Scarr, 1984; and Lal, 1992.

contact with the European world first began. The first Europeans arrived in Fiji in 1800, sailors from the wrecked schooner, *Argo*. Shortly afterwards, they were followed by beachcombers and itinerant fortune seekers, traders in sandalwood and beche-de-mer, and missionaries, the first of whom, David Cross and William Cargill, arrived in the islands in 1835. By the 1860s, some 2,000 Europeans, mostly from Australia and New Zealand were living in various parts of the islands. Their presence and actions created tensions of their own. Predictable problems of law and order arose; some of the Europeans were engaged in the blood-stained labour traffic in the Pacific that aroused the wrath of the anti-slavery activists in England; while others were busily and often fraudulently acquiring choice pieces of fertile land in the islands.

These developments took place at a time of a great struggle for political supremacy among the leading *matanitu* (Fijian political confederations) in the islands. Pre-eminent among the 14 or so *matanitu* which existed in Fiji at the beginning of the 19th century were Bau, which was asserting its control over islands in the Koro sea, Rewa on the south-eastern coast of Viti Levu, Lakeba in the Lau group, and Bua and Macuata on the island of Vanua Levu. By the middle of the 19th century, after much intrigue and manoeuvring, Seru Cakobau of Bau emerged victorious, claiming for himself the title of Tui Viti, loosely translated as the 'King of Fiji.'

Unfortunately for him, this title conferred more problems than power, as Cakobau was held responsible for the consequences of events in the islands over which he himself had little personal control. Continued insistent demands by an intransigent European settler community for more land, a stable government and compensation for damages to settler property apparently caused by Fijians resenting their presence and demands, increased his vulnerability. After several attempts to form an indigenous island-wide government failed in the 1860s, Cakobau, with the encouragement of some Europeans, approached Great Britain with the offer of cession. 'If matters remain as they are,' said Seru Cakobau, 'Fiji will become like a piece of driftwood in the sea, and be picked up by the first passer-by...Of one thing I am assured, that if we do not cede Fiji, the white stalkers on the beach, the cormorants, will open their maws and swallow us.'² So, choosing the only realistic course of action open to him, he ceded Fiji to Britain on 10 October 1874.

Sir Hercules Robinson, the Governor of New South Wales, received the instruments of Cession from the leading Fijian chiefs gathered at Navosa, Levuka, including Cakobau and Enele Ma'afu, the latter an emissary of the King of Tonga who had arrived in Fiji in 1848 to oversee the interests of the Tongan community settled in the Lau Group, and who had risen to a powerful

² Derrick, 1951, 248.

position in the islands. Through the Deed of Cession, which formalised transfer of the islands to British control, the chiefs hoped that they could rely on ‘the justice and generosity’ of Queen Victoria and her successors and that colonial rule would promote civilisation, Christianity, trade and good government in the islands, to use the language of the times. In return, Robinson promised to keep in mind the needs and interests of the Fijian chiefs and their people, and investigate all financial claims and obligations ‘upon principles of justice and sound public policy.’ In time, the Deed came to be seen as a potent symbol of a solemn charter between the Fijian people and the British Crown, and was invoked throughout the 20th century whenever questions of political and constitutional change were discussed.

Meanwhile, the Colonial Office had chosen Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon as the first substantive governor of the nascent colony. The choice was significant and far-reaching in its consequences, for more than any other individual, it was Gordon who formulated and implemented policies which laid the foundations of modern Fiji. Born in 1831, Gordon was the son of the fourth earl of Aberdeen, Sir Robert Peel’s successor as the Prime Minister of England. He was, thus, well connected to the English political aristocracy, which gave him a remarkably free hand in running the colony.³ But Gordon was also a very ambitious man, eager from an early age to leave his mark upon the world. While still in his thirties, he was appointed Lieutenant Governor of the Canadian province of New Brunswick. From there, he went on to govern Trinidad and Mauritius, both tropical colonies with large Indian indentured populations working on the sugar plantations. This experience, combined with his social background and personal connections, influenced the direction of his work in Fiji.

Gordon arrived in Fiji in 1875 only to find a chaotic and potentially explosive situation. European settlers and speculators were laying claims to some of the best land in the colony and were clamouring for more and speedy resolution of the dispute in their favour. Capital was needed to develop the resources of the colony which Britain expected, indeed demanded, to become self-sustaining in quick time. Worst of all was the plight of the Fijian people themselves. They faced the danger of losing their lands to European settlers. On top of that, some 40,000 Fijians had recently died from an epidemic of measles accidentally introduced into the islands by a British man-of-war. To make matters worse, European experts influenced by the anthropologically-inspired evolutionary theory of human development fashionable in the latter half of the 19th century, confidently predicted an early extinction of the Fijian people, their society crumbling under the onslaught of a superior technological western civilisation. Only the fittest would survive, and that meant the Europeans.

3 For a biography of Sir Arthur Gordon, see Chapman, 1964.

To solve these problems, Gordon promulgated a number of policies.⁴ Many of these are well known to the students of Fijian history, but they bear brief repetition for the general reader. To investigate European land claims and codify the indigenous forms of land tenure, Gordon appointed a land commission, which met over many years. Fijians provided ample evidence that there was no single, uniform pattern of land ownership applicable to all parts of Fiji; the variations were significant and apparently widespread, but Gordon decided to the contrary, decreeing that all land be held in inalienable right by the *mataqali*. As a result of this policy, eighty-three per cent of all land in Fiji remains in the hands of indigenous Fijians. With the transfer of previously Crown land into native land, the percentage in Fijian ownership is closer to ninety.

Gordon also acted expeditiously to shield the Fijians from the harmful exposure to outside influences. He prohibited the compulsory engagement of Fijian labour on European plantations. A system of native taxation was devised to enable Fijians to meet their tax obligations in kind rather than in cash, thus minimising disruption to village life. Fijian mobility was restricted, and a series of minute native regulations defined what a Fijian person could and could not do in the villages. Finally, a Council of Chiefs was created or rather formally recognised to advise the government on matters relating to Fijian welfare and development.

There is much debate among historians of Fiji about Gordon's Fijian policies. They have pointed out his many mistakes, his faulty understanding of Fijian society and its cultural patterns.⁵ Gordon believed he was recreating the true structure of Fijian society, whereas in truth, he was creating or blessing one which reflected and incorporated his own views and vision and current anthropological thinking. Fijian cultural practices and social institutions which offended western, Christian notions of private propriety and morality, for example, were quickly outlawed and their practitioners exiled to remote parts of Fiji or otherwise punished. Those who dared to question the framework and the foundations of colonial rule were similarly treated. Among them was the Fijian rebel Apolosi Nawai, a charismatic leader far ahead of his times, who championed—exploited in the eyes of his detractors—the cause of the ordinary Fijians and challenged them to stand up to their European exploiters. For his effrontery, he was exiled for long periods of his adult life to Rotuma, New Zealand and, towards the end, to the remote islands of the Koro Sea.

Nevertheless, when all is said and done, Gordon was an enlightened governor for his time; there were few like him then and since who made the survival and prosperity of an indigenous people the corner stone of their administration. It should be remembered that Gordon did not intend his policies to be set in stone.

⁴ For a study of Gordon's policies, see Legge, 1958.

⁵ See France, 1969.

He believed that the Fijian people needed about 25 years in which to recover from the harmful effects of contact with the outside world and to stabilise their situation. Around the turn of this century, a re-examination of his policies did take place by a series of colonial Governors, including Sir George O'Brien, Sir Henry Jackson and Sir Everard im Thurn, but by then it was too late. Much had happened since Cession, and attitudes had hardened too far for there to be a genuine dialogue about reform. Within 25 years an innovative method of governance had become an encrusted orthodoxy tethered to a past increasingly at variance with the realities of the modern world and detrimental to the broader interests of the indigenous Fijian community itself.

To promote rapid economic development, Gordon realised early that he would have to look beyond the impecunious European settlers, themselves reeling from the collapse of the cotton boom following the end of the American Civil War. Gordon knew that the salvation of the colony lay in a large-scale plantation economy of the type he had seen in Mauritius and Trinidad. Sugar cane had shown potential as a viable commercial crop in earlier experiments in the islands, and he chose it. To develop and manage that industry, Gordon invited the Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR). The Company arrived in Fiji in 1882 and remained there till 1973. For nearly a century, this colossus dominated the economic life of Fiji. A great part of Patel's life would be spent battling the CSR.

Plantation economy is labour intensive; but local labour was hard to come by. Fijians could not enlist for commercial employment except in exceptional circumstances and then only with official authorisation. In any case, the Fijian people saw no particular virtue in routine, back-breaking plantation work when subsistence agriculture and the life-style it encouraged addressed their basic needs. The Pacific Island labour trade, which had started in the 1860s, was expensive and too morally tainted to be relied upon to any significant degree. Even then it was doubtful whether it could meet the labour requirements Gordon had in mind. In the end, about 20,000 Melanesians were recruited from the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides to work on the sugar cane and copra plantations. Some of their descendants continue to live in Fiji, a vulnerable, marginal minority on the fringes of society.

Gordon turned to India. The system of indentured emigration had been in existence since 1834. Mauritius was the first colony to import Indian indentured labour, followed a few years later by British colonies in the West Indies, notably Trinidad, British Guiana and to a lesser extent Jamaica. By the 1870s, hundreds of thousands of Indians from various parts of India, but principally from the North, had crossed the *kala pani* (the dark dreaded seas) to these distant places. By then, too, the administrative structure of the indenture system had been firmly established.

Fiji had approached India with a proposal to import Indian labour in the 1860s, but the Indian government was unenthusiastic, lacking confidence in the ability of the makeshift Cakobau government to enforce the provisions of the proposed immigration legislation. That obstacle was removed when Fiji became a British Crown Colony in 1874. The Government of India sanctioned the emigration of its subjects on the broad understanding that its subjects who settled in the colonies would enjoy social and political rights equal to those of their fellow subjects. This view was most expressly stated in the now famous Lord Salisbury's Despatch in March 1875, where it was said:

Above all things we must confidently expect, as an indispensable condition of the proposed arrangements, that the Colonial laws and their administration will be such that Indian settlers who have completed the terms of service to which they agreed, as the return for the expense of bringing them to the Colonies, will be in all respects free men, with privileges no whit inferior to those of any other class of Her Majesty's subjects resident in the Colonies.⁶

This document was frequently cited by Indo-Fijian leaders as having the same significance and import for the protection of Indian rights in Fiji as the Deed was for the protection of Fijian rights. Critics argue that the Despatch could not have the same legal or moral force as the Deed, for, among other things, it did not mention Fiji specifically. In any case, they say, since the 'indispensable condition of the proposed arrangements,' the Indian Government's more active involvement in the encouragement of colonial emigration, was rejected by the various Indian provinces and by the Government of India itself, the despatch cannot have much legal authority.

In matters of high policy, minor technical quibbles can be a dangerous thing. Since the beginning of Indian indentured migration to Fiji, the Government of India constantly reiterated the equality of Indian settlers in Fiji, and elsewhere, with other colonial residents. The labour-starved colonial government of Fiji accepted this principle, which for the Government of India was the precondition for continued Indian emigration. India's position is quite evident from the words of the Crewe Commission which investigated the situation of Indians living in the colonies in 1910.

Writing specifically about Fiji, the Commission said:

The present administration itself fully recognises the value of the Indians as permanent settlers and is willing to concede them the enjoyment of equal civil rights. The whole tenor of the correspondence between India and the colony shows that it was on this condition that

6 The full text of this document is in the National Archives of Fiji; a copy is in my possession.

indentured immigration in Fiji has been allowed in the past, and any measures leading towards lowering the political status of the immigrants or reducing their economic freedom would, in our opinion, involve a breach of faith with those affected.⁷

The comparison between the Despatch and the Deed of Cession is interesting. The words most commonly associated with the Deed, the maintenance of the 'paramountcy of Fijian interests,' are not mentioned once in the document. The general sentiment was that, all things considered, the rights of the Fijian people 'shall be recognised so far as is and shall be consistent with British Sovereignty and Colonial form of government,' just as the general sentiment of political equality lay behind Salisbury's Despatch. It is a point of some importance which is not frequently appreciated in Fiji.

The first group of 498 Indian indentured labourers arrived in Fiji aboard the *Leonidas* on 14 May 1879. Although at first unwelcome to European planters, who resented Gordon's Fijian labour policies and hoped for cheaper labourers from nearby sources, the new immigrants soon proved themselves to be reliable and productive workers, and their industry quickly dispelled the planters' reservations.⁸ And so, a steady flow of Indian labour began. Altogether 60,000 Indian men, women and children came to Fiji between 1879 and 1916, when indentured emigration was finally abolished. They were a part of over one million indentured migrants who had left India for the colonies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The indentured labourers came on a five year agreement—a long and apparently complicated word which was shortened to *girmit* by the illiterate peasants—which stipulated the conditions of their employment: they would be expected to do work related to the cultivation and manufacture of crops; on weekdays they would work for nine hours and five on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays being free; adult males would earn one shilling per day and women nine pennies; they would have free medical care and accommodation in the 'lines', as living quarters on the estates were called, small, congested rooms that provided little space for privacy and even less for social and cultural recreation, and rations for the first five months on a scale stipulated by the government of four pennies per day for each adult over the age of 12; and finally, the immigrants would be entitled to a free return passage back to India at the end of ten years of residence in the colony; they could, of course, return after five, but at their own expense.

By the standards of the 19th century, the contract could be seen as, and indeed was, a remarkable document, especially when the very notion of a contract between an employer and an employee was something unheard of. However,

⁷ From the passage (no. 358) of the report cited in a debate in the Legislative Council, 1965.

⁸ Lal, 1982, Chapter 8, 55-69. Generally, Gillion, 1962.

more important than what was in the agreement was what was left out of it. The indentured workers did not know, for instance, that they would have no voice in the choice of their employers, and once allocated to one, they could not obtain a transfer to another employer except in the most exceptional of circumstances, such as gross abuse of contract or 'illegal' violence. They were not told that their mobility would be curtailed by law: the labourers could not leave their plantations for any reason without the overseers' permission. They could not easily or voluntarily withdraw from their contracts no matter how compelling the reason. Many immigrants did not know that the option of time work in the fields had been replaced by task work, which was often set on the basis of what the most able-bodied men could accomplish in a specified period of time and not what ordinary labourers could accomplish in a normal working day. Very few, if any, of them knew of the numerous penalties for breach of labour regulations, punishment for negligence, non-completion of tasks, defiance of those in authority, and the like. And it was not until the early years of this century, two decades after indenture began, that the *girmitiyas* (indentured labourers) were able to earn the amount of wages stipulated on their contract. It was a trap that few were able to escape.

Of Fiji's indentured migrants, 45,000 came from North India, the overwhelming majority from the United Provinces, now known as Uttar Pradesh.⁹ Within that province, the majority came from the poor, depressed eastern (poorbea) districts, such as Basti, Gonda, Faizabad, Azamgarh, Sultanpur, Ballia and Ghazipur. Droughts and famines were regular visitors to these areas. Opportunities for employment were few. Many people were in the clutches of money lenders. Fragmentation of landholding following the practice of primogeniture had created its own problems. Not surprisingly, then, by the middle of the 19th century, emigration had become a way of coping with the vicissitude of life in the economically depressed villages of the Indo-Gangetic plains. People from the United Provinces were migrating in large numbers to the industrial centres of Calcutta, to the Assam tea gardens, the Bihar coal mines and the Bombay textile mills, the flow increased by the availability of accessible rail transportation. By the turn of the century, noted the Census Commissioner Edward Blunt, 'there is not a single family in the Benares Division which has not at least one member in the Provinces of Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Orissa.'¹⁰

It was from this already uprooted, migration-prone mass of humanity that the immigrants to Fiji came, encouraged, no doubt, by tall tales the recruiters told of easy fortune awaiting them in the colony. A very large number of recruits had already migrated within India in search of employment when they were recruited for Fiji. Most were recruited in large cities such as Benares, Lucknow,

⁹ This is based on my book, Lal, 1983.

¹⁰ Census of India, Vol. XVI, Part 1 (1911), 49.

Agra and Delhi. When the northern sources began to dry up, the recruiters turned to South India, from where some 15,000 indentured immigrants were recruited after 1903. The principal districts of labour recruitment in the South were Tanjore, Trichnopoly, Arcot, Madras and Vizagapatnam.

The agreement under which the indentured labourers came provided for a passage back to India after a period of ten years of 'industrial residence' in the colony; they could return at their own expense after five. Most of the migrants had probably intended their excursion out of India as a brief sojourn, a temporary expedient to cope with some personal misfortune or economic hardship; it seems unlikely that many would have consciously opted for a permanent break with their kith and kin in the villages. Quite a few did return, but the majority remained behind, enticed by the prospect and the reality of better opportunities, official discouragement of repatriation, inertia and the dread of undertaking a long sea voyage again, and settled permanently in Fiji, principally in the sugar cane belt where their descendants still live.

To facilitate a stable family life and, hopefully, to create a dependable pool of local labour supply, the Government of India insisted on a certain number of women accompanying men to the colonies, the ratio set at 40 women to every 100 men on every voyage. In Fiji's case, that ratio was always met, though it did not always succeed in producing the intended results. Although the majority of the immigrants came as single individuals, some 4,000 families emigrated as well. These were not all marriages of convenience formed at the direction of the recruiting officer to facilitate the passage of single (and especially single female) migrants through the emigration depot, as has sometimes been alleged. The bulk of the families consisted of couples who had left their homes together. The grave disparity in sex ratio created severe problems on the plantations, contributing to unstable family life, encouraging sexual trafficking and leading to physical violence and suicide. It was a very long time before a semblance of normalcy returned in family and domestic arrangements in the Fiji Indian community.

Many Europeans, both colonial officials and settlers, who opposed the Indians' demand for social and political equality, continually sought to put the Indians in their place by reminding them of their forebears' supposed lowly social origins. 'Dregs of Indian society,' 'riff-raff picked up from the streets of Calcutta,' were only some of the unkind epithets used to describe the newcomers. Such denigration is not surprising, for it provided an essential ideological underpinning for the European-dominated colonial order. To accord the *girmityas* a measure of humanity, to see them as something other than beasts of burden, units of labour to be exploited for profit, would have been morally problematic. The truth, however, was that the social origins of the indentured immigrants reflected the social and demographic composition of rural India. Altogether, some 300 castes were represented in the emigrating population, the majority naturally

enough coming from those adversely affected by the deteriorating economic circumstances of the late 19th century. These included small cultivators (Kurmi, Kori), artisans (Kumhar) and landless labourers (Chamar), as well as higher caste agriculturalists (Brahmin, Thakur).

Whatever their social and caste background, the *girmitiyas* were all coolies in the eyes of their plantation employers and overseers. Work in the field was allocated according to the dictates of production quotas and not on the basis of caste. Neither was compensation based on the recognition of social hierarchy among the workers. The plantation was a great leveller of hierarchy among the workers. The indentured workers had a daily routine to follow: up at the crack of dawn when the mill whistle went off, preparing food for a hurried breakfast and lunch, sharpening tools and then off to the fields or to the mills. The whole day was spent at work, weeding crops, hoeing, cleaning drains, ploughing and harrowing, harvesting. Late in the afternoons, they returned to their lines.

In the 1880s and 1890s, when conditions in the Colony were particularly bad, workers could complete only two thirds of the tasks set, but received little or no credit for the amount of work they had accomplished. The government argued that it was a well known proposition that 'if a person engages to perform a given task or a piece of work for a given wage and fails to perform such a task, he forfeits all claim to the wage: for the performance of the task is the condition precedent to the payment of the wage.'¹¹ That view seems reasonable on paper, except that it left unanswered the larger question: why was it that the overwhelming majority of the labourers were unable to complete their allotted tasks in the first place? The labourers could, of course, take their employers to court, but there the magistrates invariably decided in favour of the weight of documentary evidence the employers were able to bring. The letter, not the spirit, of the law triumphed in the court room. Consequently, few labourers laid complaints against their employers, not because of indifference or lethargy, but because of fear, threat of retribution, ignorance of the law and, after all the risks had been taken, the dismal conviction rate of the employers.¹²

Narak (hell) is what the Indians generally called their *girmit* experience. They recalled the relentless pace of work, severe punishments for breaches of labour regulations, poverty, and moral and cultural disorientation. Life for the labourers was particularly hard in the 1890s, when the workers were completely at the mercy of their employers, and the colonial government, facing financial difficulties and preoccupied with problems relating to Fijian society, failed to protect the rights of the workers. After the turn of the century, housing improved as did enforcement of labour regulations with the appointment of

¹¹ Lal, 1995.

¹² For details, see Lal, 1986.

resident inspectors of immigrants in the major areas of Indian settlement. However, residual bitterness at the government's general indifference towards their welfare remained with the Indian people long after indenture had ended.

By the early years of the 20th century, the plight of Indians in Fiji was beginning to attract the attention of sympathetic outsiders, such as the Methodist missionaries J.W. Burton and Florence Garnham, and even the leaders of Indian public opinion. C.F. Andrews visited Fiji in 1915 and 1917 at Mahatma Gandhi's urging, and wrote critically about social and moral conditions on plantations. The high rate of suicide among migrants attracted special attention, but it was the plight of women and their reported abuse by overseers, that caught and enraged public opinion in India.¹³ The Viceroy, Lord Hardinge, was shocked to learn that indentured women in the sordid lines had to 'serve' several men in the lines, and moved to abolish the system of indenture forthwith in 1916. By then, indenture was increasingly seen by a nationally re-awakening India as a badge of moral dishonour, a stark reminder of its subordinate national stature in the eyes of the world community. Fiji protested at the certain ruin that the abolition of indenture would cause to its sugar-dependent economy. Reports of abuse were exaggerated, it said; in any case, many reforms had already been implemented in response to the complaints, and more progressive reforms were in prospect. It requested the Colonial Office to plead its cause with the Indian government and sent its own private delegations to the subcontinent to do the same, but the Government of India remained unmoved. The shipping of indentured labourers ceased in 1916, and all indentures were cancelled on 1 January 1920.

Whether *girmit* was *narak* or slavery is a matter of debate and perspective. For many Indians, indenture was a period of great physical and social hardship. Others, especially those in positions of power as *sirdars* (foremen), did relatively well for themselves. Indenture was servitude not for a lifetime but a limited sentence of five years, after which the migrants could move out and take their fate in their own hands. Most did. Those who re-indentured did so because they lacked other alternatives. *Girmit* left an indelible mark on the lives of all those who lived through it. All the familiar markers of the old world gradually disappeared; Caste diminished in importance as a determinant of social position or economic status. Marriages inevitably cut across caste, cultural and even religious boundaries. And the *girmityas* were more alone in the world, dependent for success on their own initiative and endurance. Neither community nor extended kinship network could be relied upon automatically for support in times of need. As a result, they were—they had to become—more assertive in industry and politics.

13 See Lal, 1985.

By 1901, Indians numbered 17,105 in a total colonial population of 120,124. Many of them were still under indenture, but the proportion of the ex-indentured population was steadily growing, with all the attendant consequences. In 1921, Indian population totalled 60,634 out of the total colonial population of 157,266, and by 1936, 85,002 out of 120,414. The sex ratio in the Indian community became less disproportionate. Another important demographic trend in the Indian community was the gradual dwarfing of the India-born with the Fiji-born. By 1921, for example, 44 per cent of the Indians in Fiji were born in the colony. We shall consider the consequences of these trends later.

Most of the early free Indians settled either in the cane growing areas or on its fringes and depended for their livelihood upon it. Rewa and Navua in south-eastern Viti Levu were the earliest centres of Indian settlement, and much of the early leadership of the community came from this region. However, as other areas opened up to cane cultivation and Indian settlement, their demographic and political significance declined. As time passed, western Viti Levu and parts of Vanua Levu, the principal cane growing areas of Fiji, became the main areas of Indian settlement. Some people experimented with other occupations, but limited opportunities, family obligations, kinship ties and lack of education and marketable skills, forced most to depend on agriculture, principally sugar cane and rice cultivation. The free settlers co-operated on projects requiring reciprocal exchange of labour such as building and maintaining places of worship and instruction and roads, planting and harvesting crops. They devised or recreated their own mechanisms for regulating behaviour or enforcing conformity to the norms of the society they were establishing, often from a fractured and remembered past. Official indifference to the cultural and spiritual needs of the community helped to promote a semblance of unity and social cohesion among the early settlers.

From the very early days of indenture, Indian parents realised the importance of education both for cultural survival as well as for escaping from the vicious cycle of poverty and servitude that was their lot at the time. Their keenness helped form organisations such as the Arya Samaj, which took a lead in social and religious matters in the colony, to start schools in the main centres of Indian settlement in Viti Levu. Other organisations such as the Then India Sanmarga Ikya Sangam and the Fiji Muslim League followed in the 1920s. The colonial government's concern for the social and educational welfare of the Indian community was conspicuous by its absence. In this stance, it received the solid backing of the local Europeans. The manager of the Vancouver Sugar Company wrote to the Colonial Secretary in 1914, 'We most emphatically do not require an Indian community of highly educated labourers, with the attendant trouble

which the 'baboo' class has brought to the Indian Government, teaching and preaching sedition and looking for immediate treatment on a parity with educated Europeans accustomed to self government for many centuries.'

Along with, and perhaps because of, poor educational facilities, the social and political development of the Indian community was hampered by the absence of an English-literate political leadership which could articulate its needs and grievances to the government and to the outside world. This is not to say that there were no important leaders in the Indian community at the turn of the century, for there clearly were. Individuals such as Pandit Totaram Sanadhya, Babu Mangal Singh, Maulvi Mirza Khan are some important names that spring to mind, but their energies were spent in local community affairs, and their wider influence was limited because of lack of English and poor knowledge of the workings of the colonial bureaucracy.

Until 1916, Indians did not have a representative of their own in the Legislative Council. They were represented there by the Agent General of Immigration, a colonial official responsible for the administration and management of the Indian community. In that year, the government nominated Pandit Badri Maharaj as the Indian member of the Council. Maharaj, a wealthy but English-illiterate Raki Raki sugar planter, was well known in the local community for his efforts to promote the education and social welfare for his people. But his choice was widely criticised by the Indian community, which petitioned the government in the thousands to appoint Manilal Maganlal Doctor, the Middle Temple-educated lawyer who had arrived in Fiji from Mauritius in 1912.¹⁴ Manilal had been sent to Fiji by Mahatma Gandhi at the request of Indian leaders in Fiji.

Soon after arriving in Fiji, this proud, able and effective barrister established himself in Rewa, and began representing the grievances of the Indian community to the government and other bodies. He founded the British Indian Association and started an English language newspaper, *The Indian Settler*, to educate his people and to represent their concerns and aspirations to the wider world. Manilal was the man of the moment in the Indian community, but the government thought otherwise, calling him 'the worst enemy of Indian progress in Fiji.' Hence it refused to nominate him to the Council, technically on the grounds that as a native of the princely state of Baroda, Manilal was not a British subject and thus ineligible for selection. In truth, however, the government did not want Manilal in its official circle because his compliance could not be relied on. Whatever the official view, Manilal was the most important and widely recognised leader of the Indian community in Fiji until 1920, when the

14 See Lal, 1992, 46-48.

government forced his departure from the colony for his alleged role in a strike that year by serving an order prohibiting his residence in all major Indian areas of the colony, effectively depriving him of his livelihood.

Indenture was abolished on 1 January 1920, ushering in a new era in the life of the Fiji Indian community. Its population increased steadily. More important perhaps was the increase in the proportion of Fiji-born, from 44 per cent in 1921 to 72 per cent in 1936. This change was pregnant with profound social and psychological implications for the community as we shall see in the next chapter. The Indo-Fijian community, formed by new influences and circumstances, was more conscious of its rights, more demanding of the privileges it had been denied during the 40 years it had been in Fiji.

There was a two-month strike in Suva, the first major strike in the history of modern Fiji, when Indo-Fijian workers walked off the job demanding better working conditions and pay increases to offset the increase in cost of living in the colony caused by the disruptions in shipping following the First World War.¹⁵ The prices of items basic to the Indo-Fijian diet (rice, sharps, dhal, ghee, mustard oil, spices and vegetables) had increased substantially. The government refused to accede to the strikers' demands, used force to crush the strike and arrested the strike leaders.

The following year saw another strike, this time in western Viti Levu involving Indo-Fijian cane growers and the Colonial Sugar Refining Company. The Company's tenants and workers demanded better wages (12 shillings a day), specified work hours, adequate housing, medical and pension benefits, educational facilities for their children and small plots of land to keep milk cows. The strikers were also angered by the Company's decision to alter its procedure for buying cane, no longer valuing it according to the sweetness of the cane but at a flat rate for farms grouped in 30 acre blocks.

Once again, the government used force to quell the strike with the assistance of 250 specially commissioned Fijian constables from Bau. Unfortunately, what began as an industrial strike came to acquire a racial tinge, pitching Fijians against Indo-Fijians, thus further increasing the gulf between the two communities which were already separated from each other through differences of culture, religion, language and history. The so-called ringleaders of the strike, including a recently arrived Hindu priest, Sadhu Basisth Muni, falsely rumoured to be an agent of Mahatma Gandhi, were deported. The Sadhu, even some of the government's own informers believed, was a gentle soul of progressive vision who had exercised a moderating influence in the Indian community, and

15 See Gillion, Canberra, 1977, Chapters 1 and 2; and Lal, 1992, 80-83.

concentrated his energy on educational and religious welfare of his people. For the next two decades, the relation between the Company and the *Kisan* (farmers) would continue to simmer, erupting in a strike in 1943.

With the abolition of indenture, the question of the political and social rights of the Indo-Fijian community began to acquire an importance it had not previously had. In 1922, in response to Fiji's request to re-open Indian immigration, the Government of India sent a deputation to the colony to report on the social and political conditions of the Indians already resident there. The deputation, led by Venkatpati Raju, wrote a wide ranging and severely critical report and made a number of recommendations. The Indo-Fijian community should be enfranchised. It recommended the principle of communal representation though only as a temporary measure, with each community having an equal number of seats in the Legislative Council.¹⁶ The principle of equality was important. The Government of India itself advocated a common roll, and objected strongly to any other system 'intended to assign an inferior status to Indians as compared with their fellow British subjects, and to limit the growth of their political influence in the Colony.' The deputation did not recommend any special franchise qualification for the Indo-Fijian community, but did ask for a slight relaxation of the property qualification for Indo-Fijian candidates.

The colonial government was reluctant to extend the franchise to the Indo-Fijian community. It would of course never entertain the thought of giving them political parity with the Europeans, citing the government's responsibility to the Fijian people under the Deed of Cession, including the recognition of the interests and rights of the Fijian chiefs. The Government of India agreed that 'these interests must be maintained, and [we] have no desire to question this.' But, it added, 'the elective representation on the Legislative Council at present enjoyed by the European community is presumably regarded as not inconsistent with the terms of the Deed of Cession, and it can hardly be argued that the grant of a similar status to their Indian fellow-subjects would infringe those terms.' The Colonial Office agreed with the Fijian colonial government, and in the end agreed to give the Indo-Fijian community three seats (Europeans had six) on communal franchise.

The Government of India also advised the appointment, by the Governor-General in Council, of an Agent in Fiji under the terms of the Emigration Act (VII of 1922). The Agent would not only look after the interests of the Indo-Fijian community whose forebears had come under indenture, but would also keep India informed with accurate information about their interests and welfare. Fiji could not divest itself 'of responsibility for the welfare of Indians in Crown Colonies, particularly as long as they have not received adequate representation

16 See CSO 5145/26.

on the Colonial Legislative Council on a footing of equality with all other classes of His Majesty's subjects.' The Fiji government objected and the Colonial Office agreed with it. Electoral representation would enable the Indo-Fijian leaders to articulate the concerns of their community in the legislature. It was far better for the Fiji Indians to look to their own representatives rather than to the representative of another government to defend their interests. However, as a compromise measure, the Colonial Office agreed to the appointment to the Fiji civil service of an 'officer possessed of special Indian experience and language qualification, who will be competent to act as a special advisor to the Governor on matters affecting the Indians in Fiji.' J.R. Pearson, a retired member of the elite Indian Civil Service, was appointed the first Secretary of Indian Affairs in 1927. The office was abolished in the late 1930s, but by then the Indo-Fijian community had its own leaders like A.D. Patel and Vishnu Deo who were able to represent the concerns and interests of their people to the government.

The Indo-Fijian community had travelled a long distance from uncertain, impoverished beginnings in the 1880s to the 1920s. Although 24,000 of the Indian indentured immigrants and their descendants eventually returned to India after completing their terms of service in Fiji, the majority had decided, with government encouragement, to make Fiji their permanent home. For them and their children, new problems lay ahead as they joined the struggle for equal social and political equality in their new island home. The days of unquestioning acceptance of their designated place at the bottom of the colonial hierarchy were numbered.