

## Chapter 4: Company and Kisan

The relations between the Company and the growers was strong reminiscent of barons and serfs during the Middle Ages. They had to take what was given to them and be thankful for the small mercies whether they liked it or not.

A.D. Patel, 1943

I am convinced that I was taking up a true and just cause and I am convinced that the stand I took and the advice I gave to the growers was right and I am proud of the part I played in that dispute.

A.D. Patel, 1945

On 12 January 1938, Padri Mehar Singh, Saiyyid Latif Shah and Pandit Ajodhya Prasad went to A.D. Patel's office in Nadi.<sup>1</sup> They had just formed a farmers association, the Kisan Sangh, and wanted Patel to become one of its leaders. They failed to persuade Patel. According to Prasad, Patel refused to become involved. Confronting the CSR, Patel reportedly said, was like battering one's head against the mountains of Sabeto. There was no organisation in Fiji which was strong enough to confront the Company, said Patel, and urged the three men to go home and forget about their foolish project. When Shah persisted and reminded Patel of how bad leadership and ignorance of the law had cost Indians dearly in the 1920 strike, Patel, according to Prasad, reportedly said unbelievably: 'I'll gladly pull the trigger if I find the government pointing its machine gun towards Indians.'

Unsuccessful in their mission, the three men left Patel's office and went to a shady spot under a tree nearby to ponder Patel's motives. Patel, they concluded, was a self-seeking, double-faced man, who was scared witless of the power of the CSR. Why else would anyone think that the CSR was solid and immovable like the mountains of Sabeto? Patel was all show and little substance, said Shah, a heartless coward. Prasad offered another explanation. Patel, he said, was a Gujarati lawyer motivated solely by greed. He wanted the farmers to remain disunited so that the Gujarati merchants, who dominated the rural retail trade, could continue their stranglehold over the Indian farming community.

A.G. Sahu Khan, Indian assistant to the District Commissioner Western and son-in-law of the Kisan Sangh president M.T. Khan, agreed. What really motivated Patel, he privately informed the government in 1941, was the interests of the 'moneylenders and the Gujarati trading community all of whom hear the

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1 This is from Prasad, 1962, 63-64.

sounding of their death-knell in the cooperation and collaboration between the Sangh and the Company.' These groups, he continued, 'dread the cooperative credit and cooperative consumer societies which the leaders of the Sangh have in view and feel that such schemes will be much facilitated as a result of the CSR Company's cooperation and friendliness.' Patel was always dabbling in 'politics of the extreme type,' Sahu Khan continued, motivated by nothing more than 'revenging himself upon the people for the political defeat inflicted upon him at the election before.'<sup>2</sup> Another government agent, N. Ramakrishnan, who had been dismissed from teaching at the Nadi Sangam School of which Patel was the general manager, wrote similarly, accusing Patel of playing one cultural or religious group against another. 'Tago would have paled into insignificance before him,' he said.

Stories of Patel's Gujarati greed, his vain political ambition, and his ruthless manipulation of the genuine grievances of the ignorant cane farmers for his own ends form a part not only of the colonial record, and even some scholarly accounts, but also of the folklore in parts of the cane belts of western Viti Levu. I have met men who, fifty years later, are still adamant that Patel was nothing more than a wolf in sheep's garb, and hold him responsible for divisions in the Indian cane farming community. Others, equally passionately, hail him as a hero and blame mismanagement, poor leadership and strategic blunders for the Kisan Sangh's failure. The documents on the sugar industry included in the companion volume of Patel's speeches and writings might usefully be consulted to get a better, more informed account of the affairs of the industry and Patel's role in them.

Sugar cane politics clearly make a complex and controversial story, its labyrinthine patterns nearly impossible to decipher. In the circumstances, perhaps the best way to assess Patel's role in the Fiji sugar industry, and his opponents' criticism of it, may be to evaluate his actions in the context of the times, to look at the structural impediments he encountered and the solutions he proposed. Among other things, it would involve a discussion of the power of the CSR, the attitude of the colonial government and the social and cultural divisions in the Indian community itself. Was Patel the heartless villain that his opponents said he was?

To answer that question, it is necessary first of all to look at the structure of the Fiji sugar industry. That industry was dominated by one company, the Colonial Sugar Refining Company.<sup>3</sup> Formed in 1855, the Company came to Fiji in 1880, at the invitation of the colonial government which had decided that the

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2 See A.G. Sahu Khan's comments in CSO F51/5. But about Khan, District Commissioner J. Judd wrote: 'Mr Sahu Khan makes little effort to conceal his sympathy for the Kisan Sangh and his antagonism to the Maha Sangh.'

3 For the literature on which this is based is best summed up in Moynagh, 1981.

future prosperity of the recently acquired colony lay in large-scale plantation agriculture, with sugar cane as the main crop. Initially one among several sugar refining companies in Fiji, the CSR, by 1900, had emerged as the largest miller of cane and employer of Indian indentured labour. After 1926, when it bought out the Penang Sugar Mill, it became the sole miller of cane in Fiji, a giant monopoly with corresponding political and economic influence in the affairs of the colony, an influence which the Company was not averse to wielding to bend government policy to its ends when it could.

The end of the indenture system in 1920, which caused a severe shortage of labour, heralded another change in the sugar industry. Until then, the CSR had bought substantial amounts of cane from European contractors or big Indian settlers, its own role as the sole producer of cane with Indian indentured labour having declined substantially by the turn of the century. In 1924, the CSR began what came to be known as the smallholder system.<sup>4</sup> By this scheme, the Company divided its estates into 10-12 acre plots and leased them out to prospective Indian tenants. Once begun, the process of subdivision was rapid. Thus, in 1925, the CSR cultivated 33,679 acres of cane, the European planters 4,446 acres, tenants 6,905 acres and independent contractors 19,933 acres. In 1941, however, the CSR cultivated only 3,153 acres, European planters 161 acres, Indian tenants 46,521 acres, and independent contractors 42,793 acres.<sup>5</sup>

From the CSR's point of view, subdividing made good economic sense. It resolved the question of labour supply, and by involving the Indian tenants in cane growing in their own right, subdivision, so it was hoped, would deepen their interest in and commitment to the welfare of the industry as a whole. United they—the Company and the Kisan—stood to prosper; divided, both would perish. That was the rhetoric, the reality was different. For when the Company divided its estates, it naturally had no intention whatsoever of weakening its control over the industry or its Indian tenants. In the agreements it signed with the tenants, the Company made it perfectly clear who the master was and who the servant. According to the agreement, the CSR alone was to decide what varieties of cane it would permit to be planted. The tenants were told that 'crops must be tended and harvested to the complete satisfaction of the Company' The Company was also a large landlord which could terminate any lease with its tenants if it disapproved of their cultivation or harvesting techniques. It could unilaterally terminate any lease on a year's notice or 'in the event of legislation being passed limiting its freedom of action on the said land or otherwise affecting the conditions under which it carries on its operations.' It was a not-too-subtle message to the government to watch its steps in its dealings with the Company.

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<sup>4</sup> See J.C. Potts, 1962-63.

<sup>5</sup> Narsey, 1979, 5:106.

The CSR had good reasons to keep a firm hand on the leash, among them the smooth functioning of the sugar industry. But times had changed. Its Indian tenants were not meek *girmitiyas* who could be easily forced to acquiesce, but people who were acutely conscious of their rights and now unafraid to seek them. The CSR failed to appreciate the change. As Stuart Reay, the government's labour officer, noted as late as 1941, 'in the sugar districts, the word coolie is still frequently heard, and where an Indian who does not abase himself is resented.'<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately for the CSR, the days when it could demand and receive complete subservience were long over. The time had arrived when it would be better for the CSR 'to conduct its business with tact and firmness rather than with firmness alone.'<sup>7</sup> Now, the Indian farmers had articulate leaders of their own who could, and did, speak up on their behalf in the Legislative Council and even communicated with powerful pressure groups outside the colony.

Nonetheless, the CSR still resisted the pressure to grant concessions. Throughout the 1930s, for instance, it had opposed the introduction of trade union legislation in Fiji. In the early 1930s, the Colonial Office in London had encouraged the colonies to enact trade union legislation 'in advance of the need for it, rather than defer action until the matter may perhaps have become the subject of political controversy.'<sup>8</sup> Sir Murchison Fletcher was opposed, telling the Colonial Office in April 1931 that such a legislation could be used by the ambitious politician 'for the furtherance of his own mischievous purposes.' It might, he said, 'suggest to him the opportunity of uniting by intimidation or cajolery ignorant and disaffected persons under the guise of a trade union, which would be duly registered.'<sup>9</sup> When the Colonial Office asked Fletcher to reconsider, the Governor told London in May 1932 that he would wait until he got the CSR's response. The Company agreed with the Governor. F.C.T. Lord, its attorney in Fiji, said that any trade union legislation 'would be a grave mistake, and may be fraught with serious consequences to the future welfare of the colony, with its varied races and interests.' There was an identity of interest between the Company and the government, Lord hinted. Such legislation would 'sow the seeds of discord and industrial strife,' he advised, and could conceivably be the first step in the demand for more legislation for arbitration courts, wage boards, and the like. Faced with these views, the Colonial Office baulked, after being assured by the government that the matter would receive attention 'if and when there is any indication that wage labourers in the Colony are disposed to form associations for the protection of their legitimate interests.'

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6 CSO 36/7.

7 Governor to the Colonial Office, 8 April 1940 in CO 83/233.

8 CSO 36/7.

9 Colonial Office Series, 83/191 for this discussion.

The Indian labourers and farmers had been agitating for protective trade union legislation for some years. The subject was raised at virtually all colony-wide conferences of Indian leaders in the late 1920s and 1930s. But rather than wait for the government to provide leadership, the cane growers took the lead and formed an association of their own, the Kisan Sangh. The new association came into existence at Ba in November 1937, after months of secret midnight meetings in western Viti Levu to avoid detection and persecution by the CSR. The main force behind the formation of the Sangh, and its founding general secretary, was Ajoydhya Prasad, an India-born school teacher who had come to Fiji in 1926. Mohammed Tawahir Khan, a wealthy Lautoka trader, became the inaugural President. Delegates from all the major sugar areas of Fiji were co-opted into a thirty-two-member executive committee of the association. General dissatisfaction at the CSR's attitude toward the growers lay behind the formation of the Kisan Sangh. As things stood, both the independent cane growers as well as the CSR tenants were completely at the mercy of the Company.<sup>10</sup> They could not plant vegetables or keep poultry or cows on CSR land; the Company alone could determine the varieties of cane the farmers could plant; and the Company could demand labour from its tenants for work on its tramways and in the mills and fields.

The Sangh wanted these excesses corrected.<sup>11</sup> It wanted the payment of a flat rate of 16/6 per ton weight of cane supplied rather than the percentage of cane sugar system (p.o.c.s.) which the farmers hardly understood. It demanded an increase in the purchase price of cane from the CSR, and opposed the fallowing of land on Company leases. The growers themselves wanted to decide whether they should plough the field after the first ratoon rather than as the Company decreed. It wanted to appoint its own men to check accounts and the sugar content of cane at weighbridges. And it wanted to have a say in appointing sirdars. In short, the Sangh wanted to promote the growers' interests by checking the excessive power and influence of the CSR.<sup>12</sup>

Starting the Kisan Sangh was not easy. One important obstacle was the intransigence of the CSR. It simply refused to recognise the Sangh as an organisation representing the cane growers.<sup>13</sup> As the District Commissioner Western wrote in January 1940, 'The Company will not have anything to do with the Kisan Sangh.' The Sangh's correspondence went unanswered. The Company went further. It barred Kisan Sangh officials from entering its property, which included its leases to the Indian tenants. It even threatened to evict those of its tenants who associated themselves with the Sangh in any

10 See McGusty's report in CSO CF 51 /29.

11 See CSO 51 /29 (confidential) for this and other related affairs.

12 CSO CF 36/1/15.

13 For CSR's attitude see Sir Philip Goldfinch to Governor, 28 February 1940 in CS051/29.

way. Some government officials were sympathetic towards the farmers and quietly pleaded with the Company to change its attitude. Wrote Stuart Reay, the Commissioner of Labour, in 1941: 'At the head of the Association are shrewd and able men inspired apparently by strong convictions and untainted by motives of personal gain. The unity and strength of the Sangh, the quality and motive of its 'led trade unions or planters associations in Mauritius.'<sup>14</sup> This is how the Governor himself described the Company's attitude to the farmers in a note to J.E. Shockbargh of the Colonial Office: 'We have fixed the price of cane at what we consider to be a just and reasonable level, and we have laid down certain conditions which we require you to accept. We are not prepared to enter into any agreement on the subject and we expect you to rely on the Company's good faith.'<sup>15</sup> When the government hinted that it might introduce workmen's compensation legislation, minimum wages and an arbitration tribunal, Sir Philip Goldfinch, the CSR General Manager, threatened to personally visit London to oppose the measures.

Finally, in 1941, the CSR yielded but only when it realised that both the Fiji government and the Colonial Office would recognise the Sangh's existence and authority among the growers anyway. The Governor wrote to the CSR's attorney in Fiji, Irving King, in March 1941: 'In the opinion of the Government, there is no longer any doubt as to the permanent nature of the Kisan Sangh as an industrial association representing the great majority of cane growers, and as such, it is a body which must be given formal recognition.'<sup>16</sup> Within three years after it was established, official sources estimated that close to 75 per cent of the cane growers had joined the organisation or were otherwise sympathetic to its goals. Many debt-ridden farmers were attracted to the Sangh's proposal for a farmers' cooperative and trading stores in the cane belts of western Viti Levu. These ventures, they were promised, would free them from the clutches of rapacious moneylenders and Gujarati traders.

For a while, the prospects for the Kisan Sangh looked bright as a truly representative body of cane growers. There was unity among the farmers and a resolve as well to improve their lot through mutual cooperation. And the Sangh seemed able to deliver on some of its promises. It was able, for example, to negotiate a ten-year contract with the Company, which in the circumstances was no mean achievement. For its part, the CSR agreed to meet some of the farmers' demands, such as improving the delivery of fertiliser, reducing interest on advances to 4 per cent, allowing a farmers' representative to be present at the mill weighbridge to check the weight of cane. Farmers were given written receipts for cane proceeds, and Company tenants were allowed to grow some

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<sup>14</sup> CSO 36/7.

<sup>15</sup> CSO 51/29 (confidential).

<sup>16</sup> CSO 36/7.



food crops on their leaseholds. The Kisan Sangh was given the responsibility for appointing sirdars, and agreed to cooperate with the Company to settle disputes among farmers, increase the efficiency of the harvesting program, and persuade its members to bear losses that occurred in the industry. By 1943, the Sangh had a limited capital of £10,000. In August 1940, 72 per cent of cane growers in the Northern and Western division had joined as members, and in March 1941, the financial membership of the Sangh stood at nearly 3,000.<sup>17</sup> Kisan Sangh had made an impressive start.

But soon problems set in. One reason was that people like Patel had not joined the organisation. Whether Patel refused because he was an agent of the Gujaratis will become clear in due course, but here it is necessary to note Patel's distrust of people like Ajodhya Prasad and M.T. Khan. In the 1937 elections, both of them had campaigned for his opponent, Chattur Singh. Patel could not be trusted, they had said, because he was a Gujarati; to now to seek this Gujarati's support for their organisation, seemed ironic, not to say suspicious. Patel also opposed the Kisan Sangh's seemingly cosy relations with the CSR which developed after the Sangh was formally recognised by the Company. Whereas the Sangh saw a community, even an identity, of interest between the growers and the millers, Patel emphasised the differences:

We must recognise the fundamental clash of interests which exists between the CSR Company and people and Government of Fiji. It is to the Company's interest, being an outside concern, to produce sugar here in Fiji as cheaply as possible and to sell it abroad as dearly as possible, and the margin between the two is the margin of profit that the Company pays to its shareholders in Australia. They have no interest in this Colony as far as marketing their product is concerned, therefore the buying power of the people of the Colony is immaterial to them. On the other hand, it is very, very material that there is no competition in the labour market, that they command their labour at the cheapest possible rate, that there is no competition in agriculture.<sup>18</sup>

A.D. Patel, however, was not the only prominent Indian leader who refused to join the Kisan Sangh. S.B. Patel, Vishnu Deo and Said Hasan were among other leaders who had kept their distance from the organisation. Indeed, after brief enthusiasm, some of the Sangh's own members left the organisation in dismay. Chattur Singh, the beneficiary of the Kisan Sangh's electoral support, wrote to the Governor on 16 July 1940 about the 'harmful' activities of the organisation and sought to 'have the Kisan Sangh declared an unlawful association for the duration of the war.' The organisation's members, he said, were similar

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<sup>17</sup> CSO CF 36/7.

<sup>18</sup> Patel in the Legislative Council, 21 Dec. 1945.

to 'fifth columnists.' They allegedly assaulted those who refused to join their organisation, coerced people to sign papers in the middle of the night, set their opponents' cane on fire, and generally harassed them. Swami Rudrananda called the Sangh's tactics 'gangsterism.'<sup>19</sup>

Chattur Singh was one prominent Sangh supporter who had turned against the organisation. Another was Sadanand Maharaj, son of Badri Maharaj, a member of the executive board of the organisation and part of the Sangh delegation which had met the Governor on 22 May 1939. He told the Governor privately that he had doubts about the objectives of the Kisan Sangh but had joined it to counsel moderation. Maharaj had an agenda of his own, though: he wanted to be appointed a Justice of Peace. Maharaj's behaviour was not surprising; like so many others in his community then, and later, he was pursuing his own interests behind the facade of community interests.

There were others in the Indian cane growing community who were also disenchanted with the way the Kisan Sangh was conducting its affairs. Among them were many South Indian cane growers. Once the Sangh had gained the CSR's reluctant recognition, it had softened its stance toward the Company. That suited many Sangh members, many of whom were North Indian independent contractors who grew their cane either on native leases or on freehold land, and not as tenants of the CSR. As late comers to Fiji and to the sugar belt of western Viti Levu, many South Indians worked either as direct employees of the CSR or as its more vulnerable tenants. By and large, they were economically worse off than many North Indians. They were dismayed to see the Sangh moderate its stance. The fact that many North Indians looked down upon the South Indians, calling them 'bushmen' did not help matters.<sup>20</sup> Many Punjabis were also unenthusiastic about the Kisan Sangh. This was partly because some of the Sangh leaders and their allies in the Legislative Council had opposed immigration in the mid-1930s. They and the South Indians felt that the Sangh was a well thought-out move by some prominent North Fijian leaders to capture important sectors of the Indian community.<sup>21</sup>

The first indication of a division in the cane growing community came in 1938, when Goldfinch visited Fiji. The South Indians, led by Swami Rudrananda and A.D. Patel, met him at Lovu, Lautoka. At that meeting they raised their concerns. For reasons of his own, Goldfinch was sympathetic. Among other things, the CSR agreed to help the Sangam by granting it blocks of land to build schools in western Viti Levu. With time, the gulf between the pro and anti-Kisan Sangh factions increased. To no one's surprise, in June 1941, five years after the

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19 N. Ramakrishnan, administrative assistant based in Nadi, accused the Kisan Sangh of using 'terrorist methods.' See CSO CF2/19. Ramakrishnan was intensely anti-Patel.

20 CSO 51/29.

21 J.E. Windrum to D.C. Western, 24 August 1938, CSO 36/3.



Kisan Sangh was launched, a rival growers organisation, the Akhil Fiji Krishak Maha Sangh, was formed in Nadi by some fifteen hundred farmers. Its legal adviser was A.D. Patel, and its leading members included Sadhu Kuppuswamy, M.N. Naidu, Swami Rudrananda, Tulsi Ram Sharma and Ratu Mela. The new organisation was launched after a dramatic attempt by Kisan Sangh members to prevent the formation of the new, rival organisation had failed. The meeting launching the Maha Sangh was held at the Nadi Sangam School. It was a shrewd tactical move by A.D. Patel, who was also the School's general manager. When the Kisan Sangh members tried to disrupt the meeting with alternative proposals and violence seemed imminent, a *mele* ensued. Exercising his authority as the general manager, Patel asked the police to eject the Kisan Sangh members from the school compound. He succeeded, but the move divided the farmers more than ever before and the bitterness of the division lasted for a long time.

Throughout this period, the late 1930s and the early 1940s, the plight of the farmers had been steadily deteriorating. The price of cane had fallen, and the farmers were deeply in debt. Then things took a turn for the worse with the outbreak of the Pacific war in 1942, dramatically increasing the price of most basic food items. Many Indian cane growers in the Western Division, particularly in the Nadi-Lautoka area, were evicted from their farms to create space for war-related work, such as the construction of barracks, supply depots and the airport. The displaced farmers approached the government as well as the CSR for help. Patel took up their case with the Company directly, but the CSR would not listen, and the government was powerless, perhaps even unwilling, to act. On 22 June 1943, Patel wrote to the Colonial Secretary. 'Ninety per cent of the growers do not wish to harvest cane/ he wrote, 'unless and until the price is raised to at least double the pre-war level.' He went on:

Considering the tremendous rise in the prices of livestock, agricultural tools and implements, exorbitant repair charges and almost prohibitive cost of harvesting coupled with the high cost of living, the Maha Sangh is of the opinion that unless the price of cane is raised, it is impossible for growers to carry on with sugar cane cultivation and they will have to by force of circumstances altogether give up cultivation of sugar cane and resort to crops which would ensure them a reasonable margin of profit and a decent standard of living.<sup>22</sup>

The government acknowledged the problem which, it said, was 'common to all sugar-producing colonies' and promised an enquiry 'which will be made [to ascertain] whether any remedial measures are contemplated.' A week later, it appointed a commission under the Conciliation and Arbitration Ordinance of 1941 to 'enquire into the demands of the cane farmers for an increase in the price

22 *Fiji Times*, 28 August 1943.

of cane, and matters incidental thereto, and make recommendations thereon.' The commission was chaired by the Attorney General, and assisted by Hugh Ragg and Appabhai Patel.<sup>23</sup> B.D. Lakshman, then a member of the Legislative Council and active in trade union politics, supported the appointment of the commission along with the leading members of the Kisan Sangh. By doing so, they hoped to get the government on their side, and perhaps the CSR as well, while at the same time cutting the ground from under the Maha Sangh. Perhaps they knew that the government would not appoint a court of arbitration under any circumstances, and so half a loaf was better than none.<sup>24</sup>

Patel and the Maha Sangh rejected the idea of a commission of enquiry altogether. A commission, Patel said, would achieve nothing except delay the resolution of the dispute. The CSR, which was based in Sydney, could not be compelled to produce its books in Fiji. Instead, Patel demanded a court of arbitration with the power to make binding recommendation. As he wrote in a Maha Sangh circular: 'We do not want an enquiry. What we want is conciliation or arbitration. A commission merely enquires. Aboard conciliates. A court arbitrates. Let the government give us a Board or a Court.' Patel was convinced that if all the facts were placed before an independent authority, the farmers' claims would be vindicated. Patel reminded the Governor of the promise he had made to the growers at Lautoka on 19 July, to set up a Board to bring about conciliation in the industry. He advised the Governor that if the commission failed, there was a provision in law to set up a Court of Arbitration. Many growers supported Patel, including a faction of the Kisan Sangh, led by Padri Mehar Singh.

The commission sat in various parts of Viti Levu throughout July, but farmers refused to appear before it, including those from Rewa led by Vishnu Deo and Said Hasan. Boycotted by the growers, hampered by lack of general public support and unable to accomplish much, the commission closed in early August. As we shall see later, the commission's findings vindicated Patel's suspicions and served to discredit those in the Kisan Sangh who had supported its appointment. Meanwhile, in August, a few farmers in Ba informed the District Commissioner that they wanted to harvest their cane but were being harassed by hooligans hired by the no-cutting gangs. Sensing an opportunity to break the strike, the government posted armed constables in the cane growing areas to offer protection to those who wished to harvest. The presence of armed constables heightened tension and imparted a racial overtone to the strike, reminiscent of 1921. Most of the constables were Fijians and the cane growers all Indians. Still, the government's presence failed to intimidate the growers, the majority of whom refused to harvest.

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<sup>23</sup> CSOCF2/53.

<sup>24</sup> The early history of the strike is in CSO CF 36/1/15.

The government then resorted to other measures. It declared sugar an essential food item and sanctioned a penalty for impeding its production. The Defence (General) Regulation of 1942 was amended to detain any one on the grounds of 'public safety, defence, the maintenance of public order, the efficient prosecution of the war or the maintenance of supplies or services essential to the life of the community.' This hastily devised piece of legislation was issued against A.D. Patel and Swami Rudrananda on 6 August, restricting their movement to within a radius of five miles of their homes in Nadi and further requiring the two to notify in person their movement to the police.

If the order was designed to intimidate Patel and Rudrananda, it failed. Patel responded in an 'Open Letter' to the Governor on 12 August.<sup>25</sup> He reminded the Governor of his statement to the farmers at Lautoka on 19 July. At that meeting, the Governor had told the growers that as owners of their crop, they were not obliged to harvest it if they did not want to; they could do what they liked with it. He also reminded the Governor of the provisions of the Industrial Disputes Ordinance which could be invoked to resolve the dispute; appointing a commission of enquiry, which the farmers had rejected, was not a step in the right direction. The law provided, Patel continued, that if the commission failed, as it evidently had, the Governor was empowered to appoint a board or a court of arbitration. The Governor was also reminded that although the growers had been assured that Fiji was in constant communication with the Ministry of Food through the Secretary of State for the Colonies, months had passed and nothing had eventuated.

The detaining order, Patel said, was humiliating. 'When the head of a Government makes a Regulation in haste and punishes people even before any one has an opportunity of knowing what new Regulation he has made, such an act in our humble opinion loses all the respect and dignity that law is entitled to exact from the citizens and it merely becomes the will of a despot.' As a believer in the 'noblest ideals of democracy/ and the freedoms espoused by President Roosevelt, Patel continued, he and Rudrananda could not 'see our way to humiliate ourselves and report in person every day to the Police Station.' Both men, however, agreed to inform the government before they broke the order. The 'Open Letter' closed with a reminder to the Governor of Secretary of State Lord Moyne's White Paper on the trade union movement in the colonies and the responsibility of colonial governments to foster them. 'Our imagination is staggered and the words escape our lips: Is this [the detaining order] really the practical interpretation of Britain's New Colonial Policy?'

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25 Quote from the 1943 strike file, compiled by Swami Rudrananda, which is in my possession; reproduced in the companion volume.

This was quintessential Patel, standing on a principle and reminding the authorities that it was they who were breaching their own policies, not him. The news of the detaining order, and Patel's and Rudrananda's decision to disobey it, spread rapidly throughout Viti Levu, galvanising the farmers and rallying them behind the two men. Both Patel and Swami Rudrananda were brought to the Nadi court for sentencing on 12 August. Some 700 Indians converged on Nadi that day, as shops closed throughout western Viti Levu and prayer meetings were held. In court, Patel read a prepared statement once again drawing attention to the hasty manner in which the Defence Regulation had been amended. Although a regular subscriber to the Royal Gazette, he said, he had come to know of the amendment on the 10th, just four days after it had been gazetted. He was not an ordinary criminal, Patel reminded the court, but among other things, president of the Bar Association of Lautoka, President of the Indian Association of Fiji, President of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, and General Manager of the Sangam. He would not suffer humiliation. 'In such circumstances I believe that it becomes the duty of every self respecting citizen to disobey such an iniquitous, unmerited, arbitrary humiliating Order.'<sup>26</sup>

For the crime of not reporting their movement to the police, the magistrate fined Patel and Rudrananda £50 each or one month's prison sentence in default. Both refused to pay, but the magistrate could not commit them to prison without the preliminary step of assessing levy and distress on their respective properties. It would take five days to issue the distress warrant, during which time they remained free. Before the five days were over, an anonymous well wisher, in fact S.B. Patel, paid the fine. In a public note, A.D. Patel rebuked S.B (without naming him) for putting both himself and Swamiji in an embarrassing position. Patel appealed his conviction on the charge of obstructing the cutting of cane. The Supreme Court upheld the appeal on the grounds that since it was not the legal duty of farmers to cut their cane, it could not be an offence to persuade them against it.

The government responded swiftly by amending the Defence Regulation to make it an offence 'to endeavour to induce any person not to cultivate or not to harvest any crop which has been declared by an Order of the Governor to be essential for the prosecution of the war, or essential to the life of the community.' One way or another, the government was determined to reclaim its authority. Times had changed. Two decades earlier, the government could exile Apolosi Nawai or issue a residential prohibition order against Manilal Maganlal Doctor without a second thought and without the fear of being challenged in court, which themselves were effectively under the government's thumb. In the 1940s, however, Fiji was no longer the isolated colony it once was. And Patel was not one to accept arbitrary orders without protest.

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26 The same source as above.

The detention episode had another effect. It powerfully underlined the fact that whatever else it did, the government could not ignore Patel and his appeal among the cane growers. The public's outrage at his conviction was proof enough of that. It also effectively demolished the Indian administrative assistants' assessment of Patel as a selfish leader, an agent of the Gujaratis, who was using the Indian community for his own ends. Another view current at the time, and in some circles even now, was that Patel was deliberately prolonging the strike as an act of vindictiveness toward the farmers who had opposed him in the past. The longer the strike continued, the more debt a farmer was likely to descend into. Nothing was better for the Gujarati shopkeeper than the spectacle of farmers steadily descending into debt. Evidence points to contrary conclusions, suggesting that Patel and other growers' leaders worked extremely hard, often behind the scenes in private negotiations, to bring the sugar dispute to a speedy resolution.

On 21 August, Said Hasan, the Indian nominated member, called Patel from Suva to convey a message from the Governor.<sup>27</sup> At the request of the Indian members of the Legislative Council, the Governor reportedly agreed that the counsel for the growers and the counsel for the Company (Patel and Sir Henry Scott respectively) should examine the Company's accounts. Whatever figure might be agreed between them for the cost of production of sugar would be accepted by the government and cabled to the Ministry of Food. The message was communicated to Patel by Superintendent Kermode. Patel travelled to Suva the following day (Sunday) and, accompanied by Hasan, met Scott in his chambers. Scott outlined the Company's position: the growers would have to begin harvesting before it would allow inspection of the accounts. Patel responded that 'the settlement of the dispute was the only way left open for getting the cane harvested quickly' Scott then arranged for a meeting between Irving King, the CSR attorney in Fiji, himself and Patel the next morning.

At that meeting on Tuesday in Scott's chambers, King rejected Patel's proposal. Patel told the two that 'we were there with a will to arrive at a settlement and that we could assure them that in dealing with the accounts they would find us reasonable.' King was unconvinced, and brought up another issue: examining the Company's accounts would take a few weeks as four mills were involved. Patel proposed to 'sit night and day' to save time. To prevent further delay, he suggested that Hasan could examine the accounts of the Rewa growers whose cane was crushed at the Nausori Mill, while he would do the same for the Lautoka area. The Lautoka figure, he suggested, might be accepted as the average for western Viti Levu generally 'as conditions of producing sugar cane were more or less the same in those districts' while the Nausori figure might

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<sup>27</sup> Based on 'What happened in Suva,' by A.D. Patel and circulated widely in the cane growing districts. In the Rudrananda file; see companion volume.

be accepted as the mean for the southern districts. According to Patel, both King and Scott seemed favourably disposed towards this proposal, though Scott doubted whether the Ministry of Food would intervene to resolve the dispute in Fiji. Scott 'personally preferred that the sugar industry sank in Fiji rather than the already overburdened taxpayer in England [be] called upon to bear an additional burden for the sake of growers in Fiji.' Talks stalled when, after consulting the CSR, King reiterated the demand that harvesting precede any inspection of the accounts.

On 26 August, Patel was summoned to a meeting with the Governor, in the presence of the Attorney General, the Colonial Secretary, and B.D. Lakshman, the Indian elected member for north-western Viti Levu. The Governor restated the issues. 'The Company was not going to disclose its accounts and it was unlikely, in any event, for any agreement to be reached between the two sides on the figure for the cost of production. He would not appoint a Court of Arbitration because the CSR had its books in Sydney and it could take up to two years for an award to be given. The Governor said that he was 'prepared to stake my reputation on my belief that the CSR Company is not making a big profit.' The growers could refuse to harvest their crop, but he reminded the leaders that any interference in the harvesting of cane was now illegal. The Governor would appoint a commission of enquiry, and would even enlarge it to include representatives of the growers organisations. A Board of Arbitration was out of the question.

The Governor and his advisors thought that if Patel asked the growers to accept the commission, they would agree. They were mistaken. The growers themselves at mass meetings throughout Viti Levu rejected the idea. In a public letter, the Maha Sangh proposed on 6 September that the 'growers are immediately prepared to harvest and sell their cane to the Government who can make their own arrangements with the Company for milling it and give the growers a fair price that would cover the cost of production and a reasonable margin of profit commensurate with the present cost of living.' The government should buy cane directly from the growers and intervene actively to resolve the dispute. The growers would sacrifice some of their earnings, but were not prepared not to fill the coffers of the Company.

The government's response was predictable. The growers would have to sell the cane to the Company, not to the government itself. The CSR and not the government was the only organisation capable of processing cane, which it would then sell to the Ministry of Food at a price fixed by the Ministry. The CSR, the Governor said, was the 'agent of the Ministry for processing the cane and manufacturing and exporting sugar.' The implication of associating the interests of a private commercial enterprise with that of the government



was that the growers were unpatriotic in their demand for a better price for their crop. Opposing the CSR was, in other words, tantamount to opposing the colonial government and the wider imperial interests.

The government's stance, which appeared to favour the Company, further antagonised Patel and other growers' leaders. On 7 September, Patel telegraphed the Governor rejecting the government's contention that the CSR was the agent of the Ministry of Food, for that would once and for all place the growers at the Company's mercy. Would the Ministry publicly announce that it would buy cane from the Fiji growers and appoint the CSR, its duly authorised agent, to take delivery of the cane from the growers? 'While other sections of the community including the Company are making larger profits on account of the war, there is no valid reason why the farmers of Fiji should make themselves the objects of charity when they can also make larger profits by resorting to the cultivation of some other crops which are at the same time more vital and essential to the war effort of the United Nations and especially to the life of the community.' The growers, in Patel's view, were justified in asking for a one hundred per cent rise in the price of cane, but he was prepared to compromise. He would advise the growers to accept an increase of five shillings per ton for the current year's crop if the government agreed to carry out an enquiry into the sugar industry and settle the basis of a future price.

To this suggestion the Governor replied the next day that since the growers were refusing to give evidence to the Commission of Enquiry he had set up, he had 'no means of knowing if an increase should be recommended to the Ministry of Food nor what such an increase should be.' It was a fair point, and Patel conceded it in his reply on 10 September. However, he said that his figure of five shillings per ton was 'not based on cost production but as a temporary expedient to settle the dispute quickly' He reminded the Governor that even with this figure, the growers stood to lose substantially. The government, Patel suggested, should take a larger view of the crisis. It should not cut its nose to spite its face. It would be far better to accede to his request and put £175,000 in the growers' hands and save a crop estimated at £700,000, instead of procrastinating further.

By mid-September, the battle was truly joined. The CSR, convinced that it could outlast the farmers in the long run, refused to reconsider its position, while the growers rejected the terms demanded by the Company. On 20 September, Patel wrote to the Governor to place their case before him, yet once again. He complained of the CSR's 'unreasonable and dictatorial attitude towards the growers.' The Company, he said, constantly reminded the growers that it was a commercial concern which existed to make profit for its shareholders. But it 'ignored the equally patent fact that the sole aim of the growers in producing sugar cane is also to make profit. Unless the growers obtain a reasonable margin

of profit consistent with the work and capital they put in and the risk and patient waiting they take in the production of cane, there is no justification for them to continue cane farming.'

The CSR was being vindictive, Patel said. Its attitude showed that 'it would rather undergo loss at present and keep the growers in the position of serfs so that their exploitation may remain as easy in the future as it has been in the past.' The Company had withheld from the growers the price of bonus of the 1942 crop in order to 'starve the growers into selling their cane to the company at its dictated price.' It was making other threats as well. The Company was telling growers that unless they began harvesting immediately, it might not buy their crop at all. The growers demanded the immediate payment of the price bonus for the 1942 crop, resumption of negotiations with their representatives to settle the present and future price of cane, and a guarantee from the Company that it would buy the entire crop from them. For its part, the government should withdraw all impending prosecutions and orders for internment against those involved in the dispute. Otherwise, the growers would plough out their crop and use the land to grow other food crops.

By now the government's predictable response was to refer the question of the price of cane to the Commission of Enquiry. Furthermore, it threatened to prosecute anyone who might disrupt the sugar industry. The commission, by which the government had placed so much store, produced its report in November. It was an embarrassment for which the government was unprepared. The commission reported that the price of cane had kept pace with the cost of living. The debt problem among the growers was caused not by the low price of cane but by their own thriftlessness and extravagant social customs. The Governor cabled London not to accept the commission's recommendations.

Patel and other growers' leaders who had opposed the appointment of the commission all along felt vindicated. Patel, in fact, wrote a lengthy critique of the report and circulated it among the growers in western Viti Levu. The commission, Patel argued, had erred in using the 1939 price as the fair base price. Said Patel:

The legitimate and proper method of arriving at a fair price is not by ascertaining how little a cane farmer and his family can live on but how much the sugar industry at present can fairly afford to pay for sugar cane. This can only be ascertained by going into Company's accounts and ascertaining whether their profits are higher now than they were before the war. If they are, then the grower is not bound to make and ought not to be made to undergo any sacrifice, because his sacrifice only helps to augment the profits of the Company at the expense of himself, his family and his community.

How was a fair price to be calculated? Patel offered this formula: 'The value of sugar plus value of molasses minus manufacturing cost, depreciation and a reasonable margin of profit divided by the number of tons of cane crushed equal to the price of sugar cane per ton.'

Equally unacceptable to Patel was the method the commission had used to calculate the cost of producing cane and the growers' cost of living. Patel's response is paraphrased at length. The learned commissioners, he said, had adopted an earlier official report on the cost of living of unskilled labourers in Suva. That report was based on the needs of an unskilled labourer and its premise was—'thou shalt live on bread alone, and if there is a deficit, well, we know, you will make it somehow, by begging, borrowing or stealing.' There was no such labourer with a family, who did or could live on a standard prescribed by the report. The fact was that Indian cane growers had never lived in the past, did not live now and never proposed to live at such a meagre standard of life which, in his opinion, was no better than that of animals. The peasants were accustomed to a higher standard of life and even that standard was considerably below the standard which one could fairly call decent.

Instead of following the advice of the Secretary of State to the colonial governments to improve the standard of living of non-European races living in the colonies immediately, the commissioners were condemning the growers to a standard considerably below the one they were accustomed to. 'Does anyone know of an Indian cane farmer's wife who lives or who would actually be content to live on one skirt made of six yards of print or haircord, one blouse made from 1% yards of print or haircord, one slip of calico and a three yard muslin 'ornee,' a year, all at the cost of £1.12.10? We believe that such a wife can only exist in the day-dreams of a poor husband harassed by the extravagance of the wife or in the report of a commission. The same thing applies to the clothing of the man as well as the children. In short the commission expects an Indian owning 12 acres cane farm, who has a wife and four children to support, to clothe himself and his family now on £13.16.1.' As far as the commission was concerned, Patel went on, the Indian farmers were no more than mere animals leading a life of isolation and not members of society with any social functions and obligations.

An average cane farmer was supposed to meet his social obligations, educate his children, marry sons and daughters, foot funeral expenses of relatives and meet a host of other expenses, within the sum of £5.7. a year! The expenses involved in entertainment and other recreations would, of course, be unthinkable in the eyes of the commissioners. What about paying interest on his debts and some saving for a rainy day? And what about comfortable and decent housing? The commission would be horrified even to hear that growers should entertain any idea of educating and marrying his children or meeting his social obligations or providing his family and himself with a few amenities of life. Indian growers

were thrifty in comparison with their counterparts in other communities. Yet, in spite of that and an efficient standard of husbandry of a decent-sized holding of 12 acres, they had for years met the deficit by incurring debts, because the Company did not pay them a fair price for their cane. The lot of the cane grower, to be born in debt and to die in debt, might mean nothing to the Company, if that ensured and enhanced its profits, said Patel. But it meant a lot to the growers concerned and to the colony as a whole. It was a social evil which the government was morally obliged to end.

The conclusion of the report amounts to this. We will not recommend a rise in price and we advise an Indian average grower to live on the cheapest diet just enough to keep his body and soul together; he should never dream of meat, fish, or eggs even though the majority of growers are meat eaters; he should clothe himself and his family with the cheapest clothes sufficient not to make themselves liable to a prosecution for indecent exposure; we advise him not to think of the education or marriage of his children, and to avoid all social obligations and amenities of life; we have allowed £5.7.7i on top of food, fuel, housing and clothing of the most primitive type and a splendid margin of £6.14.9 is left for him, that is of course if he does not pay £20.0.0 to a cane cutter instead of £10.0.0 as we advise and some how limit the cost of cultivation within the straight jacket we have laid down in our report; but, if he has to pay £20.0.0, well, he can further tighten his belt and go in sack cloth and ashes, can't he?

On Christmas Eve 1943, the government enlisted Ratu Sukuna's support to re-start negotiations with the growers' leaders.<sup>28</sup> Sukuna travelled to Nadi and met A.D. Patel along with S.B. Patel and Swami Rudrananda at Patel's house. On 26 December an agreement was reached, and all four signed it. The actual agreement was as follows:

After considering the interest of growers, the sugar industry and the economic welfare of the Colony, we the undersigned agree that it is in the best interest of all parties concerned to settle the present dispute over the price of cane immediately in the manner following, that is to say:

1. The growers would offer their cane to the Government who will be responsible to the growers for the payment of a fair price.
2. The Government should appoint as early as possible [a] Price Fixing Board to determine [the] price of sugar cane from year to year.

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<sup>28</sup> For the negotiations, see CSO 2/19, part 3, and the strike file of Swami Rudrananda. It will therefore not be necessary to make lengthy references to sources about what follows.

These are the broad principles on which the dispute can be settled. If these two principles are acceptable to His Excellency, the details of the settlement may be discussed with His Excellency by us and may be agreed upon.

Nadi, 26th December 1943 sgd. J.L.V. Sukuna Swami Rudrananda A.D.  
Patel S.B. Patel

Ratu Sukuna travelled back to Suva with the signed document and presented it to the Governor. At first the Governor seemed pleased at the imminent breakthrough. He cabled London approvingly, but then changed his mind after further discussing the draft agreement between Sukuna and the growers' leaders with the CSR. It was clear that the CSR would not, under any circumstance, accept the formula. The government was caught in a most embarrassing position. Sukuna had signed the agreement—his signature was proof of that; and much as the government regretted Sukuna's action, there was little that it could do about him. On the other hand, the government could not ignore the CSR's adamantness either.

So, on 28 December, two days after the agreement had been signed, Sukuna wrote to Patel restating the government's old position. Since the CSR was the only organisation capable of processing cane in Fiji, Sukuna told Patel, 'any arrangement for delivery of cane to Government would therefore, in effect, have to mean delivery to the Company' As for their demand for an increase in the price of cane, 'there was no properly attested evidence adduced' that justified it. That being the case, the government could not give any guarantee of a fair price. That was a matter to be resolved between the CSR and the growers. Regarding the suggestion about a price fixing mechanism, the matter was before the Secretary of State for the Colonies. The ball was in the growers' court as far as the government was concerned, Sukuna said, and it was up to their leaders to prove their loyalty to the colony.

A.D. Patel, S.B. Patel and Swami Rudrananda replied to Sukuna's letter on the same day. They agreed that the matter of price-fixing legislation was before the Secretary of State, and there was little the Governor could do to hurry the matter along. But 'in order to reassure the growers and encourage them to plant cane,' the government should announce this publicly, as well as its intention to introduce such a legislation when London's decision became public. The Governor was not prepared to commit himself to any particular course of action. On the question of the delivery of the cane to the government, Patel stated: 'We realise that the delivery of cane to government would be in effect delivery at the Company's tramline as agreed amongst us during the discussion.' He also reminded Sukuna of the agreement (which he had signed) to leave the question of fixing a fair price 'to the conscience of the government.' The government

would have none of this. The delivery of the cane meant its delivery to the CSR: 'there appears to be no point in maintaining the fiction that Government is to be a party to the transaction, except as a benevolent onlooker.' And the question of a proper price, it said, was not a matter 'of conscience but of contract.' That, in effect, meant that the growers would be paid according to the existing contract between themselves and the CSR.

Patel wrote to Sukuna again on 30 December, reminding him of the agreement he had signed, according to which the growers were to sell their cane to the government which would then be responsible for paying the money. The government would instruct the farmers to deliver the cane to the CSR tramline, which the growers would be obliged to obey. But the growers were clear on one thing: it was the government they were dealing with and not the CSR. In their view, therefore, the government was 'not a benevolent onlooker but the other party to the transaction.'

When the government refused to budge, Patel made a final offer through Ratu Sukuna on 3 January 1944. The growers, he said, would offer their crop as a gift to the government, and would even harvest it for them for a modest cutting fee. Patel told Sukuna: 'I am sure you will appreciate the difference between the growers' willingness to undergo sacrifices to assist the war effort and unwillingly under pressure selling their crop to a private profit making monopoly at the price dictated by it for the sole purpose of making as much profit for its shareholders as possible.' For his part, Sukuna disputed Patel's claims about the government's complicit role in the dispute, criticised him for prolonging the strike, defended the CSR for fulfilling its part of the bargain, and suggested that the growers should harvest the remainder of the crop and resume planting for the next season as a gesture of support for the colony's war effort.

By early January, it was clear that the fight was over. The combined power of the CSR and the government had overwhelmed the farmers' will to resist, many of whom were already heavily in debt. So they finally agreed to harvest what was left of their standing crop. At least as far as they were concerned, they were selling their crop to the government, and not to the Company. By then, some 14,000 tons of cane had been burnt and destroyed and some one thousand acres ploughed out. Of the estimated total of 824,801 tons of cane, only 434,168 were harvested (332,669 tons of green cane and 101,499 tons of burnt cane).

In 1944, the government asked Professor C.Y. Shepherd, of the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad, to enquire into the sugar industry. The farmers repeated their by now standard complaints before the enquiry, and made some additional ones. The CSR should add the value of molasses and bagasse to the price of sugar when calculating the price of cane, allow farmers to choose from a variety of cane so that they could choose one more suited to the



soil conditions of their farms, and permit farmers to grow food crops on a part of the land leased from the CSR. Patel also asked for a Sugar Board, comprising the representative of growers and the Company and the government, to oversee the industry. The Company, too, reiterated its position that it had not been making the huge profits its detractors were alleging.

The commission found that the cost of living of the growers had increased dramatically by 115 per cent between 1939 and 1945, while the average price of cane in the same time period had increased by only 50 per cent.<sup>29</sup> It agreed that many farmers were indeed in debt. Nonetheless, the Commission thought that the CSR had not made substantial profits, though it could have afforded to pay more for the cane than it was prepared to. On an important point, Shepherd agreed with Patel. There was a need for an independent Sugar Board, with an independent chairman, to oversee the running of the sugar industry. Patel, who had accompanied Shepherd during his tours of the Western Division, impressed him with his intelligence and knowledge of the sugar industry. Indeed, in a private note to S. Caine of the Colonial Office, Shepherd said as much, and thought Patel would make an excellent member of the Board when it was established.

The CSR was pleased with the report which it found 'so favourable to the Company we are surprised that Professor Shepherd has considered it necessary to recommend any alteration at all.' Those changes he did recommend, as we shall see, the Company found ways to stifle and water down to such an extent as to make them irrelevant. Patel and his group gave the report a lukewarm support. They argued that the Company's assets were overvalued, and thus the depreciation which the Company obtained at the rate of 4 per cent per annum was excessive. Shepherd should have made more searching enquiries into the actual value of the Company's assets, rather than depend on their stated value. They rejected Shepherd's view that 'improvident farming' was largely responsible for the plight of the farmers. But the farmers accepted the recommendation to create a Sugar Board consisting of elected representatives of the growers, the government and the Company. Similarly, they welcomed the recommendation to create a Scientific Investigation Committee with representatives from the growers on it.

At first, the government reacted favourably to Shepherd's recommendations, but when the CSR objected, the government retreated. Thus, for instance, it accepted the Company suggestion for an advisory Cane Experiments Consultative Committee, instead of a Scientific Investigation Committee, with no power to direct experimental work which would continue to be carried out by the CSR at its own expense. Similarly, the government, at CSR's urging,

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29 The Sugar Industry of Fiji: Report by Dr C.Y. Shepherd (London, Colonial Paper 188, 1945).

procrastinated on the creation of a Sugar Board. In CSR's view, the Board would be 'regarded by growers' leaders as a stepping stone to the control of the industry or even nationalisation.' If the Board were established, the CSR said, both the government and the Company 'would find it difficult to resist the political pressures to grant more and more voice in the control of the industry to the Indian growers, or rather to their political leaders.'<sup>30</sup> It would take another strike and another commission of enquiry for the government to finally create such a board in the 1960s.

Several things become clear from the above account of the strike. Patel and other strike leaders were not playing fiddle while Rome burnt. Throughout, as we have seen, they struggled to find a solution to the crisis. The government, and his opponents, charged that Patel was quibbling over details and prolonging the crisis unnecessarily; but there was more to the story than that. Patel responded to the criticism: 'I am convinced that I was taking up a true and a just cause and I am convinced that the stand I took was the right one, that the advice I gave to the growers was right and I am proud of the part I played in that dispute.' He quoted Sir Philip Mitchell, the Governor of the colony during the dispute: 'Patel, you would never be able to convince me that I was in the wrong, and perhaps I would not be in a position to convince you that you were in the wrong, but I wish you to know that I respected you all along for the manner in which you opposed me.'<sup>31</sup>

In the ultimate analysis, the strike was not about personal egos and wounded pride and selfish ambitions of vain individuals, as the critics of the strike tried to argue; it was about re-structuring the sugar industry, replacing a serf-baron relationship, as Patel put it, with a relationship of equal partnership. He acknowledged the contribution the CSR had made to the colonial economy, 'but they have been amply paid for what they did for the people and government of Colony, not only amply paid but paid over and over again.' The CSR had to realise that the times had changed, and that farmers could no longer be bullied or coerced into submission. The CSR was a giant that did not need to be feared, Patel said, but faced, tamed not succumbed to. For that to happen, it was vital to have the government involved in the sugar industry. Patel went further and called for the nationalisation of the sugar industry to introduce some measure of control over the CSR and to ensure that 'the conditions of the workers and primary producers in that industry can be improved.'<sup>32</sup> The government could not be a neutral onlooker. The farmers suffered greatly from the strike; many were broken and went bankrupt; but they realised that one could not always have rain without thunder.

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30 CSR's Fiji Inspector to General Manager, CSR Sydney, 23 October 1952.

31 Legislative Council Debate, December 1945.

32 Legislative Council Debate, December 1945.

The strike was Patel's baptism of fire in Fiji politics. He had remained true to his convictions and refused to succumb to pressure from the Company and the government. For his stance, he won the respect of those who opposed him in public. Most importantly, Patel won the respect of the Indian cane growers, many of whom were intrigued to find a Gujarati lawyer fighting their case without fee, and who was prepared to go to jail for the principles he believed in. His resolve and fearlessness had stirred them and stiffened their own determination to stand up for their rights in ways that had seemed unthinkable in the pre-war years. Even though the strike had failed, the ordinary farmers had gained something more. Through all the sacrifice and the suffering they had endured, they sent forth the message that they could no longer be taken for granted by the Company, that they would stand up for their rights and interests even at great cost to themselves. The Indian cane grower would no longer be 'timid and totally ignorant of what takes place outside his own domestic circle,' as Secretary of Indian Affairs McGusty had told CSR General Manager Sir Philip Goldfinch in February 1940.<sup>33</sup> Patel had fostered a powerful, determined resolve among his people, and they elected him to the Legislative Council in 1944.

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33 CO 83/233.