

Chapter 6: Interregnum

If the Fiji Indians do not open their eyes in time, they will be met with the fate of an ostrich burying its head in the sand.

A.D. Patel, 1952

A capacity for enjoyment is probably the most valuable gift that anyone can possess.

A.D. Patel, 1958

By 1950, A.D. Patel had become one of the most influential and widely known figures in the Indian community and in the public affairs of the colony generally. His work in the Legislative Council was well known. His reputation as the Colony's leading criminal lawyer was securely established, his only rival in the field being Philip Rice, whom Patel himself respected. In 1946, Patel travelled to India as the Fiji Indian delegate to the Indian National Congress at Meerut, where he met future Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and discussed the situation of the Fiji Indians with him and other leaders of the Congress. The following year, while still in India, Patel married Leela Ben, an attractive and graceful woman, the daughter of Professor B.N. Patel, an acquaintance of A.D.'s. She was 20 when she married; Patel was 42. They returned to Fiji a few weeks later and started their life together in Nadi. For Leela, the early days in Nadi were a nightmare. Making the transition from the bustling metropolis of Bombay to the bush-village atmosphere of a rustic Fiji town was not easy. She had no family or friends or acquaintances in Fiji to help her make the transition and to ease the pain of social isolation. She found the whole environment claustrophobic and constricting and yearned to return to her more cosmopolitan homeland.

Nonetheless, the 1950s were the happiest time for the Patels. They shared each others' interest in gardening, music, food and cultural pursuits. Children came, first Atul in 1948, then Pratibha and Dhimant followed by Vasantika and Amita. In 1952, the Patels made a leisurely boat trip back to India, via Australia, taking in sight seeing tours at Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Fremantle on the way. It was wonderful to get away 'from the petty vexations of life in Fiji,' Patel wrote in his diary. Perhaps for the first time in his life, Patel was enjoying a semblance of stability and inner emotional tranquillity. His law practice was flourishing, he read widely and wrote extensively and elegantly on a whole range of subjects. He gave speeches which still survive in the memories of those who heard them. He served on official committees such as the Education Advisory Board to which he was appointed in 1957 and on the Library Enquiry Committee. He was a member of the Camera Club of Fiji. In 1955, he took out

a prospecting licence with Pandit Ram Sumeran and Ram Dev on some four hundred acres of land. Patel wanted to start citrus farming in Fiji, which proved to be a financial disaster. Then there were the regular readings of the *Bhagavada Gita*, the *Upanishads* and the *Gitanjali* organised by the Prarthana Sabha of Nadi, formed in 1954, whose members, besides Patel, included Swami Rudrananda, H.M. Lodhia, Sundarji Kalidas, Bhaskaran Iyer and R.O. Sharma. Patel was a regular chief guest at various sports carnivals. In 1956, he donated the Atul Kumar trophy to the Nadi Soccer Association, named after his eldest son. In the midst of all this activity, Patel also somehow found time to found newspapers, establish a high school and manage a string of Sangam primary schools throughout Viti Levu.

A major reason for this happy state of hectic activity was that Patel was out of politics. He had been defeated in the 1950 election for the Legislative Council by a relative newcomer to the political scene, the first Fiji-born Indian lawyer, Tulsi Ram Sharma. Patel polled 1,850 votes to Sharma's 2,340. Sharma served only one (three-year) term in the Council, was defeated at the next polls three years later, and then retired to a quiet private life in Lautoka, never to be heard from again. In 1953, Patel was defeated again, this time by Ajodhya Prasad of the Kisan Sangh, Patel's most powerful and persistent opponent in sugar cane politics since the late 1930s. Prasad polled 2,718 votes to Patel's 1,919. Two successive defeats depressed Patel and he did not contest the next three Legislative Council elections. He would enter the Council again a decade later in 1963. Governor Sir Ronald Garvey wanted to nominate Patel to the Legislative Council, but each time he was approached, Patel declined the offer. If he could not get into the Council as the people's elected representative, he would not go there at all, and certainly not by the 'back door' of nomination. To become a nominated member in the Council would make a mockery of the principles he believed in, Patel told the Governor.

Why did this man, who was widely admired for his political abilities, and who had been the Indian member of the Executive Council from 1947 to 1950, fail at the polls? The principal cause of Patel's political eclipse in the 1950s was the growing personal and ideological rift between himself and Vishnu Deo. As we have already seen, Vishnu Deo was an influential and effective politician, with a wide network of powerful friends and supporters throughout the colony. One crossed swords with Deo at one's own peril. Many issues divided the two leaders. One, which also aroused great emotion in the Indian community in the post-war years, was prohibition. The government proposed to relax restrictions on liquor consumption, and wanted to gauge public opinion on the subject.¹ Vishnu Deo, being a devout Arya Samaji and a strict teetotaler and a dedicated prohibitionist, opposed the move. Liquor was a drug, and if other drugs could

1 See Legislative Council Debate, February 1946.

be prohibited, why not liquor? Hindus and Muslims were forbidden by their religion from drinking liquor and, Vishnu Deo informed the Council, most of them supported total prohibition. He was convinced that alcohol was one of the great curses of mankind, destroyer of families and fortunes. Many in the Indian community did agree with Deo. Among them were J.F. Grant of the Indian Reform League, J.P. Maharaj, President of the Arya Samaj, Phuman Singh of the Sikh Gurudwara Committee and Kifait Husain of the Fiji Muslim League. Five hundred Indian women gathered at the Suva Sangam Hall and supported Vishnu Deo's position.²

Patel was on the opposite side in the debate. He did not drink either, beyond the occasional dry sherry at social occasions, but he opposed prohibition. He argued that 'it is self-denial that turns a man into a saint, not prohibition; prohibition only succeeds in turning a man into a hypocrite.' Experience in the United States, and even in certain parts of India itself which had tried prohibition, showed that all such experiments failed. In India, he said, 'bootlegging in the cities proper was going on galore and prohibition had rather become a laughing stock.' If it didn't succeed in India, it was hardly likely to succeed in a small place like Fiji. And why should prohibition be enforced only against the Indians and Fijians? As far as the Fijians were concerned, Patel said, the 'matter should be left entirely to the Fijians themselves to decide,' perhaps through the newly created Fijian Affairs Board. As for Indians, drink was not new to them; they had been drinking liquor long before Europeans. Any attempt to enforce prohibition amongst Indians would be met with resistance, he warned. It would give rise to distilling illicit liquor and the use of methylated spirits as a substitute.

Then there was the racial aspect to consider. Why should Indians, or the 'responsible classes' among them (doctors, businessmen, lawyers) have to apply for a liquor permit when Europeans were exempted. 'Indians understand their responsibilities and their obligations in life just as any responsible member of any other society, and naturally they all feel that this is a sort of indignity cast upon them.' Vishnu Deo remained unconvinced, but Patel's assertion that even the Hindu gods had partaken of the golden liquid aroused considerable commotion among the more religious-minded sections of the community. What Patel had said was tantamount to sacrilege: how dare this Gujarati say that Hindu gods drank alcohol?

Another issue on which Vishnu Deo and A.D. Patel differed strongly was language education.³ It has to be said that both men were passionately committed to the cause of education. Vishnu Deo was the leading light in the Arya Samaj's quest for

² A petition was sent to the Secretary of State for the Colonies on 8 January 1947 by these groups urging total prohibition.

³ CSO F28/10.

the expansion of educational facilities in the Indian community. Patel, too, was a committed educationist. As early as 1938, he had called for the introduction of compulsory education, the provision of technical and vocational training, the establishment of intermediate and secondary schools and the admission of a prescribed percentage of Indian children to European Grammar schools.⁴ Both men saw education as a vital instrument not only for earning a decent livelihood but for cultural and social liberation of the Indian community. On the question of the language of instruction in schools, however, the two disagreed. For Vishnu Deo, the teaching of English in the primary schools of the colony was a matter of priority. Vernacular languages should be taught to standard four or five, but thereafter instruction should be in English. He realised the obvious fact that English was critical for jobs in government and the private sector.

English should be taught in schools, Patel agreed, but not at the expense of the vernacular languages. It was not simply a question of language teaching, it was the question of preserving one's cultural identity. In this, Patel was expressing the feelings and apprehensions of the minority cultural groups in the Indian community. North Indian children would learn Hindi and English, but what about the mother tongue of other children, South Indians, for example, or Punjabis and Gujaratis, he asked? One should progress in every sphere of life, but not at the expense of one's cultural identity. For the North Indians, the majority in the Indian community, this was not an issue, but for the minorities it was. It will be recalled that Patel had petitioned the government in 1937 to bring Telugu and Tamil teachers to Fiji.

The increasing political rift between Patel and Vishnu Deo came to a head in 1948, when the question of selecting an Indian elected member of the Legislative Council for the Executive Council came up.⁵ The existing practice was for the elected members of the Council to forward a single name for the Governor's appointment. The five members in the Legislative Council that year were Patel, Vishnu Deo, M.S. Buksh, Ami Chandra and James Madhavan. Both Patel and Deo put their names forward. Madhavan supported Patel and Chandra backed Deo, leaving Buksh as the only uncommitted member. Madhavan was a South Indian and with the Sangam while Chandra, like Vishnu Deo, was an Arya Samaji. Buksh did not see himself as being suitable for the Indian seat on the Executive Council. In his view, the best candidates were Patel and Vishnu Deo. Sensing Buksh's reluctance and hesitation, Patel nominated Buksh, whom Deo openly considered an unworthy candidate. As the senior Indian member who had been in the Legislative Council continuously since the 1930s, Vishnu Deo considered a seat on the Executive Council to be his prerogative. Buksh, hurt by Deo's attitude, reciprocated Patel's gesture, and supported his

4 Fiji All Indian Conference, November 1938.

5 This is based on interviews.

nomination. As Buksh put it, '*Un ka pehanaya hua hoar unko hi pehana diya.*' [I garlanded him with the garland he offered me]. If Vishnu Deo had agreed even to talk to him, Buksh said later, he might have reconsidered his position.⁶

Patel had out manoeuvred Vishnu Deo and won the coveted Indian seat on the Executive Council, but it turned out to be a pyrrhic political victory for him. For in the late 1940s and the 1950s, Vishnu Deo was organisationally the best prepared Indian politician in the colony. And he would use his extensive contacts to keep Patel out of the Legislative Council. There was not a single major Indian organisation which did not come under Deo's influence or have his signature on it. There was, first of all, the Arya Samaj, the close-knit, influential reformist Hindu sect which, although a minority among the Hindu population, counted among its members a significant portion the better educated and wealthier sections of the Indian community. Vishnu Deo was its unrivalled intellectual and political leader. In recognition of his stature, the Central Indian Organisation of Fiji, founded by Vishnu Deo, bestowed upon him the title of 'Jan Ratna,' the People's Prince (Jewel) in November 1948.

The Arya Samaj also organised a number of grassroots social and cultural organisations which further strengthened Deo's influence. These included Gram Sangathan (Village Associations), Navyuwak Sabha (Young Men's Association), Swayam Sevak Dal (Self-Help Organisation), Mahila Mandal (Women's Society), and various farmers' and workers' unions. On 2 May 1948, Vishnu Deo launched the Central Indian Organisation of Fiji (Bhartiye Janata Ki Kendriye Sabha), of which he was the president and Udrek Singh and Dr C.M. Gopalan and his wife were the vice-presidents.⁷ The organisation's principal constituency was the Indian community in southern Viti Levu, but its goals were wide-ranging. Among other things, the organisation wanted to protect and promote the welfare of the Indian community, lift the position of Indian women by giving them the franchise and recognising the principle of equal pay for equal work, organise programs in adult and community education, provide relief and assistance to the needy and, 'to nominate and support as and when so determined candidates for elections to the Legislative, Municipal and Town Councils and to other bodies for which elective principle is or will be applied for the representation of the people.' The organisation had an elaborate constitution which specified its operational procedures, membership, and the composition of its decision-making parts.

In a very real sense, the Central Indian Organisation of Fiji was the first political party in the Indian community, and Vishnu Deo was its founding father and its

6 It has been suggested that Buksh may have been leaning towards Patel because he, Buksh, was a sympathetic friend of the Sangam.

7 Based on papers relating to these organisations in the papers of K.L. Gillion (in my possession).

guiding light. With such a strong and inclusive organisational base, Vishnu Deo became not only the king-maker in the Indian community but the king as well. From 1950 to his retirement, Deo remained a formidable, though a somewhat mellowed, moderate figure. But he still pulled the strings. To Deo's organisational strength, Patel had no answer. Instead of relying on organisations, Patel hoped to win elections on the strength of his ideas and the force of his advocacy. He was still a popular and effective politician, as the closeness of the election results showed; but it was Vishnu Deo and the men he chose and supported who triumphed. '*Jab Apna Hai to Gair Kyun*' [Why another when we have one of our own] was a standard rally in the 1950s. In 1956, Vishnu Deo finally entered the Executive Council, defeating James Madhavan who had succeeded Patel. Three years later, he would retire from politics.

Vishnu Deo was an important source of Patel's problems, but there were others. Patel's close identification with the cause and the philosophy of the Indian National Congress also played a part. 'My sympathies with the Congress are well-known in this Colony,' Patel admitted publicly.⁸ It was indeed, and amply demonstrated at public gatherings, especially at the Bharat Mata Day (Mother India Day) celebrations when the Indian national anthem, '*Bande Matram*' was sung and speeches were made on Indian politics, culture and history. It was only natural for Patel to identify with the currents of Indian politics. As already mentioned, he was the Indian community's representative to the Meerut Congress meeting in 1946. And then there were emotional and cultural attachments as well. More than this, however, Patel was convinced that the political destiny of the overseas Indians was closely linked with India's position in the international community. For him, India's independence could only lead to an improvement in the position of the Fiji Indians. The Colonial Office could ignore the plea of the Fiji Indian community, but it could not ignore the voice of the Government of India. When India spoke, London listened. It was, after all, the pressure from India that had precipitated the abolition of indenture; and it was pressure from India that had forced a reluctant colonial government in Fiji to enfranchise the Indian community and address its social and economic concerns. After independence, the Indian lever weakened, which Patel regretted.

Some of Patel's Fiji-born younger colleagues—the Deokis and the Grants—also opposed Patel's politics. Fiji was their home, not India, they said in letters to the press, and demanded that the currents of Indian politics and communal thinking should not be allowed to pollute the shores of Fiji. Especially opposed to Patel were the more westernised members of the Indian middle classes who had gained a measure of success and security through close identification with the local political and cultural elite. Patel reminded them of their Indian heritage, and worked for its preservation and propagation. He wanted the Fiji

8 Legislative Council Debates 21 February 1946.

Indians to acknowledge their heritage and be proud of it. As he said in 1952: 'Centuries before the birth of Christ there flourished in India a civilisation, which has been an enigma and a wonder to the historian.' Modern sciences like mathematics and medicine had their beginning in India. 'On the sacred soil of India has been born a galaxy of world figures, like Ram and Krishna, Buddha and Gandhi, Ramakrishna and Vivekanand, who have made their impress [ion] on the thought and life of vast masses of men in the world.'⁹ The Fiji Indians should consider it their moral and cultural duty to pass on the message of Indian civilisation to their fellow citizens of other races. But the Fiji-born were made of a different stuff; their social universe and world view were fashioned by a different historical experience, social background and cultural outlook. Pragmatic as always, un-beholden to tradition, they were on their way to becoming a part of the establishment in the public service and in the professions. Patel's relentless criticism of colonialism was an embarrassment to them. Moreover, many were not unhappy to cut their umbilical cord with their ancestral motherland. Most had never visited India, and most never would. The Fiji-born-India-born or Gujarati and non-Gujarati conflict, which had existed for a long time, was still an important factor in Fiji Indian politics.

Apart from the Indian middle classes, Muslims, too, disliked Patel's close identification with Indian politics. The communal tides of the Indian subcontinent continued to lap the shores of Fiji. Muslims, who had long advocated a separate roll for themselves because, as they said, they were racially different from the Hindus, seized upon the partition of India as proof enough of their claim for a separate identity. Patel opposed the Muslim demand for a separate electoral roll, as did Vishnu Deo though perhaps not as tenaciously; but Patel bore the brunt of the Muslim separatists' anger because of his Indian connection with and active sympathy for Congress politics. In fact, in 1950, the Fiji Muslim League officially backed Patel's rival, Tulsi Ram Sharma, in the Legislative Council elections. Said Hasan, the Indian nominated leader in the Council, spearheaded the anti-Patel campaign in the late 1940s. Nor was Patel's position helped by the new Indian High Commissioner to Fiji, Samuel Alfred (Altef) Waiz, an Indian Christian, who advised Fiji Indians to keep away from political developments in India. Fiji was their home, and their primary loyalty should be to that country. He, too, was loyal to Fiji, Patel responded, but pride in Indian culture and civilisation should not be construed as disloyalty to Fiji, and defended his view that Indian culture had something to contribute to the social and moral development of the colony. Waiz and Patel clashed several times on public occasions, especially after Waiz applauded Vishnu Deo's leadership abilities. Both the Fiji Muslim League and the Arya Samaj found a common cause in opposing Patel and supporting Tulsi Ram Sharma in the 1950 election.¹⁰ It may be of some interest to note that in 1952,

⁹ *Pacific Review*, 8 August 1952.

¹⁰ *Pacific Review*, 9 May 1950.

Vishnu Deo told John Dugdale, the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, that he would not oppose a single separate seat for Muslims to be elected by members of that faith alone.

Apart from Muslims and sections of the Fiji Indian middle class, there were some members of the South Indian community who also moved away from Patel. Patel was the General Manager and Legal Adviser to the Sangam until 1953 (when Swami Rudrananda became the General Manager and Patel the Legal Adviser). There had always been some South Indians who accused Patel of simply using the South Indian community for his own political purposes. Some leading South Indians were already in the anti-Patel camp, such as C.M. Gopalan and K.S. Reddy. Then in 1951 an event occurred which intensified the suspicion of those already distrustful of Swami Rudrananda and A.D. Patel. In that year, Swamiji attempted to amalgamate the Sangam and the Ramakrishna Mission into a single unit following unanimous resolutions authorising the affiliation of the two bodies, passed in 1947 and again in 1950.¹¹

Some South Indians in Viti Levu saw Rudrananda's actions as no more than a blatant attempt by the Mission to take over the considerable assets of the Sangam. The Swami was a swill, they said, and even wrote to the Ramakrishna Mission in Calcutta protesting his actions and asking for his immediate recall. Sadhu Kuppaswami, the founder of Sangam, defended Rudrananda: 'It is my wish to make the Sangam a branch of the Mission. In this connection it is neither a trickery of the Mission nor of Swami Rudrananda.'¹² In truth, it was neither greed nor graft that lay behind Rudrananda's decision. If anything, it was ineptitude, his action the result of bad advice and complete unfamiliarity with the way business works. He saw absolutely no problem in diverting funds from one branch of the same organisation to accomplish a project in another. For Rudrananda, the Sangam and the Ramakrishna Mission had identical aims, so what was the harm in amalgamating the two? In any case, more important than the sectional interests of a particular community was the welfare of the entire Indian community. The Swami had a universal, not a narrow communal vision. But his opponents thought otherwise. It was the South Indians who had collected the funds, which, they said, should be used first for their benefit before anyone else's. They should be consulted before their assets were moved or sold. The protests halted the amalgamation plans, and severely divided the South Indian community for many years.¹³ Eventually a compromise was

¹¹ *Pacific Review*, 21 November 1953.

¹² Published in *Jagriti* under the heading '*Dhusht Prachar*,' (Evil Propaganda). See also G.K. Naidu's statement in the *Pacific Review*, 14 Nov. 1963: 'There is no conflict. The aims and constitutions of both the organisations are similar. Interested people who are inimical towards the Ramakrishna Mission and the Sangam try to see conflict where none exists.'

¹³ K.S. Reddy proposed a 'Cultural Societies Restriction Bill (Fiji Royal Gazette, 19 Aug. 1954) which prohibited any society or company from amalgamating without the consent of the Governor-in-Council, whose decision would be final. Reddy was one of those who led the fight against Rudrananda's plans.

reached when the Sri Vivekananda High School was transferred to the Mission and Sangam was left to run its own separate schools. But the bitterness of the dispute lingered; even today it arouses considerable emotion.

So, without a strong organisational base, and with religious, cultural and petty disputes wrecking the Indian community, Patel retired to a quiet life in the tranquil political wilderness in the 1950s. He occupied his time in a variety of ways, as already noted at the beginning of this chapter. He was always in demand as a public speaker on topics as far ranging as 'Women Saints, East and West,' which focused on the lives and contributions of Meera Bai, Yashodhara, Laila of Kashmir, Rabia of Basra, St. Theresa of Spain and St Bridgit of Ireland, the lives and philosophies of Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda, Gautma Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi, to such topics as 'The Five Most Abused Words in the World.' These were God, Democracy, Communism, Freedom and Religion. Many of Patel's early speeches now survive only in fragments, in school annuals or tattered cyclostyled sheets in the possession of retired school teachers. This surviving fragment from a speech he gave on Mahatma Gandhi in 1958 gives a hint of the tenor of his thinking. Why was Gandhi such a revered figure not only in India but in the entire world? What was the source of his strength, the magnet within him that pulled people to him? That seems to be the question he is trying to understand. The answer, Patel suggested, lay in Gandhi's 'dominating passion for truth.' 'That truth led him to confess publicly whenever he thought he had made a mistake. That led him to fight evil and untruth wherever he found them regardless of the consequences. That truth made the service of the poor and dispossessed the passion of his life for where there is inequality, and discrimination and suppression, there is injustice, and evil and untruth.'¹⁴

In another talk, Patel reflected on the moral and social dilemmas facing mankind in mid-20th century. Man was out to subjugate everything he could lay his hands on. 'He has already mastered the air and conquered the skies. He has made ether his messenger boy. He has turned silver bromide and celluloid into the greatest entertainer of mankind. He has manufactured thunderbolts and lightning which make him the envy of the gods. He has invented new methods of surgery and found new drugs to cure disease which would have passed as miracles in the days of Christ. He has achieved all this and more.' And yet, despite all this progress, 'the common man enjoys more comfort but less happiness than before.' Soldiers were much better-fed and looked after on the battlefield 'but we have failed to abolish the battlefield and the havoc, misery and degradation it entails. We still rain bombs on women and children in the name of peace.' The Second World War had been fought to preserve the peace, to free the world of fear and oppression. 'All that mankind has got so far from the Second World War is the fear of the atom bomb and the loss of peace and individual liberty. Those

14 *Pacific Review*, 2 October 1958.

who fought for survival not only lost peace with their enemies, they also lost peace among themselves.' And all the while, the modes of warfare are becoming more brutal and ruthless than ever. 'The fear of war has enslaved the people of even free countries to the chains of bureaucracies, and individual freedom has become only a dream. The individual has become the slave of the herd and state everywhere.'¹⁵

Patel read widely on a variety of topics, at the breakfast table, in the car while travelling, whenever he had a spare moment.¹⁶ Jai Ram Reddy recalls him as a 'voracious reader.' And he wrote as well. Here is one small piece he wrote on 'Enjoying Things': A capacity for enjoyment is the most valuable gift that anyone can possess. Freda Lingstrom found that one of the chief delights in a wholesale enjoyment of being alive was being with other people. Even if they were total strangers, observation transformed them from passing shadows into real people. She often entertained herself when travelling in a train or bus by studying the feet of the passengers and trying to guess what kind of faces belonged to the feet. 'The feet are passively, innocently, eloquent,' she wrote, 'some turned in, some turned out, some down at heel with wrinkled socks. Some wear pointed shoes, some snub-nosed ones with neat or untidy laces, or a button which makes you hold your breath because it only hangs by a thread. Most feet are absolute portraits of their owners.' 'For me,' said Paul Dehn, the poet and critic, 'cooking a meal is like writing an article which is why I enjoy doing it. The creative business of getting words to paper and a meal on to the table are not very different. An article must have an appetising introduction, a strong middle section, and a graceful end. So must a good dinner. Style was also important, and favoured regional unity by keeping meals all-French, all-Italian, all-American and so on.' For Christopher Fry, the playwright, the unexpected and the accidental had a particular charm. 'When something is unexpected as well as enjoyable, it calls up a special response in us, as though we had gained one more small foothold in a confusing world.' The unforeseen might consist of a special melody, the sight of a snake in his actual state, a harmless slow worm coiled in the middle of the drawing room carpet, or a herd of cows on the seashore instead of in the meadows. He and his wife had received an accidental wedding present of a remarkable kind when they discovered that the old mill house in which they had made their first home, on the chance recommendation of a house agent, lay in the very valley which they had passed as an engaged couple and thought an ideal place to live.

¹⁵ *Pacific Review*, 6 January 1951.

¹⁶ Patel's personal library, minus many volumes that were borrowed but never returned, is in the Patel family home at Nadi. There are books there by Vladimir Nabakov, Bertold Brecht, Andre Maurois, S. Radhakrishnan, John Osborne, Maxim Gorky, Berdyaev Nicolas, Herbert Marcuse, Lin Yutang, John Strachey, Nirad Chaudhary, Harold Laski, John Ruskin, VS. Naipaul, H.G. Wells, all the great English novelists of the 19th century, the major writings of Indian nationalist leaders, memoirs of Cordell Hull, Winston Churchill and other such notable figures of modern history, books on Fijian history and politics and many, many more.

Patel urged people to read for the sake of sheer intellectual pleasure. He quoted Joyce Carey's advice in a speech in December 1955: 'The discovery of reading as a pleasure can change a life. For it is the keenest, the cheapest, the most lasting of pleasures, and it needs no co-operation. The most lonely people can have company in a book, the most God-forsaken soul on earth can find some peace there. And no one can know the reach of his imagination until he reads.'¹⁷ He often despaired of what he saw around him, a dreadful waste of talent and opportunity. There was so much potential, so little of it realised:

We do not possess any works of art or architecture. There are no stately homes, or beautifully laid out farmsteads or orchards. With so much natural beauty, man makes little attempt to paint or carve beautiful pictures or write inspired poetry or compose enchanting music. With abundance of stones everywhere, there is no sculpture or architecture of any sort. Fiji has so far made no start in the field of literature. Even legends, folklore or folksongs of poetic or historic merit which are usually found among primitive peoples are conspicuous by their absence. Nothing that is made or built in Fiji has got an appearance of permanence. People live and work as if they were mere sojourners in Fiji. Even the Fijians do not create or make anything which they can proudly pass on to their descendants. Fiji has so far not produced a single man of high intellectual attainment or scholarship. Education is given and undertaken solely for the purpose of white collar jobs. We are therefore a Colony of mental and spiritual pygmies who neither live abundantly nor in abundance. This is Fiji after seventy years of British rule. It is true that government cannot make people. But it can create conditions under which indigenous civilization and cultures of all communities can grow and flourish.¹⁸

Patel urged the government to set up public libraries throughout Fiji 'to attract the youth and wean them away from the perils that threaten them.' These perils included 'increasing larrikinism, recklessness, drink and other evils.' Concerted, continuous effort was needed. "There is a clear acknowledgement all over the world that we should not teach people to read and then leave them without literature. For they would then relapse into a dreary and ultimately dangerous state of half-education, in which they would be easily satisfied by crude semi-pictorial approximations of the strip cartoon and by the abundant supply of degenerate literature which destroys, rather than promotes, a capacity to face the problems of the world with skill and courage.' Many people, including S.B. Patel, thought the idea of a library service premature.¹⁹ A.D. Patel disagreed.

¹⁷ *Pacific Review*, 9 December 1955.

¹⁸ *Pacific Review*, 18 August 1959.

¹⁹ *Pacific Review*, 29 July 1955.

‘We have to make a start. We must provide opportunities for people for good reading, and create good taste. We must create good libraries to create the desire. It may appear as putting the cart before the horse. But it is not really so. We do not wait for hunger before we begin to cook.’ But this plea fell on infertile ground. The government demurred, and the politicians did not demand action. A colony-wide library system would begin a decade later when Patel became the Member of Social Services in 1964.²⁰

The Ramakrishna Mission, established in Fiji on 26 September 1952, provided the institutional base for Patel and the Swami. Rudrananda was its president and Patel its most prominent member.²¹ Patel was a devoted follower of the Ramakrishna Mission. This is what he said of its founder in 1959: ‘Sri Ramakrishna is like a lighthouse in the modern world. He has taught us the harmony of religions. Whatever maybe the source of rivers, he said, all join the same sea. All religions, wherever they flourish, lead to the same God. This is the essence of Ramakrishna’s teaching.’²² Education was a high priority of the Mission, and it was in this field that the two men worked very closely, both realising the vital importance of education to the future of the Indian community. By the late 1940s, there were only a handful of schools established specifically for the Indian community. These included Natabua (1919), Samabula (1929), Andrews, Votualevu and Vatuwaqa (1930), Karavi and Wainikoro (1931). Of them only Natabua since 1930 and Dudley since 1945 had offered secondary education for Indian children. The Sri Vivekananda High (SVH) which the Mission founded was only the second (and the first privately run) Indian secondary school in the entire colony. It is one of Patel’s unsung contributions to the education of the Indian community in Fiji. Patel, the long-time principal M.R. Balaganapathi recalled, was the ‘Father of our School,’ who had used his influence, contacts and even his own money to advance the school’s cause. This assessment is true because Patel believed passionately in the value of education. Throughout his life, he urged greater government assistance to schools, for expansion of schooling at all levels. Wrote Patel in 1954:

First and foremost must come the recognition and the realisation that education is not a luxury in colonial areas, but that it is as much a necessity as in free countries. It is an amenity for which every citizen

20 Patel was appointed to the Library Enquiry Committee in Sept. 1957, chaired by the Director of Education, and including R.A. Derrick, L.D. McOwan, C.H. Miller, Semesa Sikivou, Udayvir Singh, J. Hackett, and A.L. Parke.

21 Others included Sadhu Kuppaswamy, Appaswami Pillay, Jagnath Naidu, Munswamy Reddy, Rangaswami Naidu, H.M. Lodhia, Sundarji Kalidas.

22 *Pacific Review*, 26 March 1959.

has a right. It is a social service which should be the first charge on the finances of a country. And in advanced countries it is not uncommon for the state to spend as much as 25 per cent of their revenue on education.²³

The SVH opened at Nadi on 6 March 1949, initially under the management of Sangam but transferred to the Ramakrishna Mission in 1952. Getting the school started was not easy, just as registering the Sangam as a charitable organisation in the 1930s had been difficult. The main obstacle was the government's opposition to the idea of a private body, the Ramakrishna Mission, with no previous experience in the field of education in the colony, running a secondary school. The Education Department raised its usual concerns about staffing, curriculum, and examination. Where will the teachers come from? Who will pay their salary? What kinds of subjects will be taught in the school? The cost and maintenance of buildings and the infrastructure required to keep the school going? The government feared that the school might become a charge on public revenue at a time when it was already spending large sums of money on the expansion of primary education. There was another, unspoken, concern: that of losing control over educational developments in the colony, and of being pressured to provide jobs for graduating secondary school students. While he was still a member of the Legislative Council, Patel had a series of discussions with the Education Department officials to allay their fears and to urge them to take a more progressive view of the SVH project. They were reluctant.

Nevertheless, Patel persisted. As Principal Balaganapathi recalled, 'the tireless triumvirate ('Sadhu-Swami-Patel') with their band of loyal workers stood firm and opened our School.' Thereafter, it became easier for other such private bodies to operate secondary schools in the colony. The founding of that school was one of the most important events in the history of the Fiji Indian community in the post-war years. Before then, the number of secondary schools which catered to the educational needs of children of poor Indian parents was limited. As mentioned, the Natabua Secondary was the only high school in western Viti Levu which Indian children could attend. In southern Viti Levu, the Marist Brothers High School in Suva took a limited number of Indian students. SVH was the first secondary school in Fiji started by Indian people for the education of their children. This school was to Indian education what the Queen Victoria School was to Fijians and the Suva Grammar to Europeans.

Most of the school's early teachers came from India, with the assistance of the Ramakrishna Mission. The Mission also provided books and other assistance in getting the school started. Many students who graduated from S.V.H. went on for their tertiary education to India, sometimes on Indian government scholarships. Many went to colleges and universities in South India in such

23 *Pacific Review*, 12 February 1954.

places as Kerala, Madras, Coimbatore, Karaikkudi, Andhara, Madurai, while a few went further north to Baroda, Bombay and Delhi. Swamiji's connections and the Mission's practical assistance were instrumental in securing places for the school's students. Other students, after completing their University Entrance at the Natabua Secondary School, went on to universities in Australia and New Zealand, especially the latter. The graduates of SVH would constitute the who's who of the Fiji Indian community, including two future leaders, Jai Ram Reddy and Mahendra Chaudhry and scores of lawyers, doctors, chemists, businessmen, teachers, public servants, academics. In time, the SVH established itself as one of the premier secondary schools of Fiji.

Each year, a public figure was invited to give the convocation address at the school.²⁴ On 17 September 1954 Sir Julian Huxley opened the science department of the school and spoke on 'Science in the Modern World.' In June 1957, historian K.L. Gillion spoke on 'Writing the History of Indians in Fiji.' In May 1956, A.D. Patel asked 'Is there God?' J.G. Rodger, the Director of Education in Fiji, discussed 'The Aim of Education' in 1955, and C. Harvey, the Director of Agriculture, 'Wise Use of Land' in 1956. In 1958, R.O. Campbell, District Officer Nadi gave 'A Word Of Advice' and the Public Relations Officer Jack Hackett spoke on 'The Importance of Racial Harmony.' In March 1959, John Daniels of the CSR, spoke on 'Sri Ramakrishna and Family Planning,' and Ravuama Vunivalu addressed the school on 'Vivekananda: His Message to the Youth.' There were few schools, government or mission, which could boast such a distinguished gallery of convocation speakers. The school's older students still remember these occasions with pride.

All the normal academic subjects were taught at SVH, including English, Hindi, Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, Health Science, Geography, History and General Science. Its students sat for the Cambridge Junior and Senior examinations. Scholastic learning formed the bedrock of the school's curriculum. But there was an added dimension to SVH education. The school also inculcated pride in one's culture and self-respect. 'The so-called and so-treated downtrodden man was lifted up and made to feel a MAN with self-respect.' 'Ramaswamis and Munswamis' were no more a laughing matter,' recalled one of its teachers. Each day began with a congregational prayer and students were taught to respect all religions while remaining true to their own faith. All major religious festivals or occasions were celebrated, including Ram Naumi, Krishna Janmasthmi, Bakr-Id, Saraswati Puja, Diwali, Easter as well as the birthdays of Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Equality of all and brotherhood among men formed the core of the moral education imparted by the school. Patel expressed his hope for the school in 1952: 'Over and above the intellectual training they get, the spirit of comradeship and the unity of outlook that is implanted in the children

24 This is from the SVH School Magazines.

of diverse races, who have come to rub shoulders in the classroom and outside, will certainly help in the gradual growth of a society in Fiji with emphasis on common outlook, unmindful of the difference of race, religion or colour.’²⁵

While running the SVH, the Mission also involved itself in programs of adult education in the rural areas. Instruction in Malayalam, Telugu and Tamil was available to those who wanted it. A Mission Library was opened in Nadi, with a branch at Lautoka, inspiring the establishment of the Western Regional Library at Lautoka which was opened by A.D. Patel on 20 November 1964. The Mission together with Sangam also ran a mobile library service suitably named the ‘Gynana Ratham,’ the Chariot of Knowledge. Bhajan mandalis (prayer songs) and temples were founded, singing competitions organised and essay competitions run. The topic of the 1959 essay competition was: ‘What I learn from the Story of Rama.’ In contrast, the Education Department ran colony-wide competitions on such topics as ‘The Importance of the Cession Day to Fiji.’ The Colonial Sugar Refining Company, for its part, ran its school competitions on the contribution it had made to the development of modern Fiji.

In 1956, Patel urged the South Pacific Commission to establish a University College of the South Pacific. He envisaged it as a joint project of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Australia and the United States, to be initially affiliated with a metropolitan university—as such institutions in the Caribbean and parts of Africa were—but to become fully autonomous in due course ‘for the benefit of all the territories here.’ Patel acknowledged the difficulties involved in starting such a big project, including finance, infrastructure, staffing and curriculum, but these were matters of detail and not issues of principle. Much was to be gained by having a university in the South Pacific. Perhaps most important, it would create a ‘wise and competent indigenous leadership, essential for the solution of the problems facing the territories and the general advancement of their own communities.’²⁶ Not surprisingly, no one listened. But Patel persisted. On a visit to India in 1962, he discussed the proposal for a university in Fiji with the officials of the Government of India, which was prepared to pay half the cost of establishing such an institution, and offered the services of a Registrar. This initiative might have borne fruit but for the fact that by the mid-1960s the idea of a regional university was already being mooted in official circles, the result of which was the establishment of the University of the South Pacific in Suva in 1968, more than a decade after Patel had mooted the idea himself.

The provision of adequate educational facilities for the Indian community was an issue close to Patel’s (and Swamiji’s) heart. But the Indian community had

²⁵ *Pacific Review*, 1 January 1954.

²⁶ *Pacific Review*, 26 April 1956.

other pressing needs as well, among the most important being the need for a newspaper. They had first realised this need during the 1943 strike when, without a newspaper of their own, they had to communicate to the growers on crudely printed cyclostyled sheets. There was the *Fiji Samachar*, but it had been banned for the duration of the war for its alleged disloyal coverage of news; and it was under the influence of Vishnu Deo. What was needed were first-rate English and Hindi weeklies, which would promote greater appreciation of Indian culture and counteract the biases of the *Fiji Times*. So the *Pacific Review* was launched in 1949, and the Hindi weekly *Jagriti* in 1951. Both these papers were printed by the Sarada Sangam Press which had been established in 1948.²⁷

The *Pacific Review* was a remarkable paper, the first of its kind in the Pacific Islands to have a regional focus, though as time went on, it became a much more Fiji-focused, and a sympathetic friend of the National Federation Party.²⁸ The inaugural issue of the newspaper, dated 8 January 1949, began with three quotations:

Justice and Truth make men free, injustice and error enslave them (Mary Baker Eddy)

Courage is that virtue which champions the cause of right (Cicero)

There is need for realisation of the existing fact of universal brotherhood of man (Dr T.Z. Koo).

A.D. Patel wrote the introduction to the inaugural issue. 'The path of starting a new paper is by no means strewn with roses,' Patel said, but they had made a start. The aim of the *Pacific Review*, he went on, was to allow people in the dependent territories of the South Pacific the opportunity of 'free and unfettered expression,' and to 'break down the narrow walls of isolation and make mutual contact and our contact with the outside world easy and beneficial.' The people of the South Pacific, Patel wrote, 'have very little voice in the shaping of their destinies'. They needed a suitable medium to represent their concerns. This was made all the more necessary given the geographical location of the islands. 'Ours is a world of tiny islands flung considerable distances apart from one another with poor communication and no contact. While this sort of isolated existence may have been a splendid thing in the past, in the present world it provides no guarantee for security or peace'. The first issue carried articles on Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Nauru, the Cook Islands, and the Chinese in Samoa. Patel then explained the underlying philosophy of the paper:

27 Establishing the press with Sangam money annoyed some of the Sangam people, and hence the trouble discussed earlier in the chapter.

28 On the inaugural management board of the newspaper were A.D. Patel, H.M. Lodhia, G.B. Hari, M. Narsey, C.J. Patel, CM. Gopalan, and S.B. Patel.

We believe in freedom, justice and human dignity as the birthright of mankind. It shall therefore be our duty to fight and resist imperialism, exploitative colonialism, racialism and such other natural enemies of the fundamental rights of human beings. It will be our duty to preserve and promote mutual understanding and respect for the rights of the individual and to spread the light of knowledge and culture. We seek your support and co-operation in this noble cause.

The launching of the *Pacific Review* together with its sister vernacular papers in Telugu and Hindi was a farsighted move of great social, political and cultural significance to the Indian community at many levels. With a paper of their own, the Indians, and others not with the European establishment, now had an avenue to express their views and to communicate directly with each other, which they did not have previously. Those letters to the editor and other articles which the *Fiji Times* refused to publish for political or ideological reasons, found their way into the *Pacific Review*. Ratu Mara published an article on 'Freedom and Development in Fiji',²⁹ and Josefata Kamikamica and Ravuama Vunivalu engaged in long debates in the pages of the weekly journal. Timoci Tuivaga, the future Chief Justice of Fiji, wrote a letter to the paper in May 1949 lamenting the paucity of Fijian professionals and urging the need to pay more attention to Fijian education.³⁰ There were letters from Fijians dissatisfied with the chiefly system, with the Fijian establishment or with the pace of political change in the colony. And there were numerous letters and contributions from Indians telling the government what to do or where to go. They make wonderful, invigorating reading. The reading public and the outside world now heard a plurality of voices on subjects of importance to the country, and not just the official voice that filtered through the *Fiji Times* or the Fiji Broadcasting Commission or the government's own various propaganda organs.

Just one example of this will suffice. In the 1950s, the United States carried out a series of devastating nuclear tests in the Trust Territories of the Pacific Islands, then under its UN-supervised jurisdiction. There was little mention of this in the *Fiji Times* or other official sources. Not so with the *Pacific Review*. Patel wrote several articles on the subject. In March, 1956, he said that the 'statement of using nuclear weapons in a future war is more of a political stunt than reality. Evidently, politics in the United States is as bad as the weather in the South Seas. Both are unpredictable.' It was foolhardy to think that one could win a nuclear war; no one would 'escape ruin and devastation in a future world war.' The following month, he criticised the United States for carrying out atmospheric tests: 'In the name of humanity, stop the nuclear tests. Saner voices all over the world have proclaimed that the nuclear arms race cannot

29 *Pacific Review*, 12 November 1949.

30 *Pacific Review*, 7 May 1949.

lead to an enduring peace and that it must be stopped if humanity is to be saved from suicide.' Commenting on America's intransigence, Patel said: 'Riding roughshod over humanity and legality reminds us of dictators like Hitler and Mussolini. What resulted from them and their policies the world only knows too well.' It would be hard to find a stronger and more explicit condemnation of the American nuclear tests in any newspaper even in the metropolitan world at the time.

In addition, the *Pacific Review*, under Patel's editorial guidance, published articles on important philosophical and cultural issues by the leading authors of the day. Whether the journal's readers actually understood their contents is another matter, but both Patel and Swamiji were anxious to expose the people to great issues and ideas. Thus Bertrand Russell's article, 'Modern Mastery of Nature' appeared in an issue in 1951, along with Lord Denning's on 'The Independence of the Jury,' Girin Mukherji's on 'Buddha: The Prince of Peace,' Cambridge historian Percival Spear's 'Independence in the Modern World/' along with scholarly articles on the lives of Albert Einstein, Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira, Swami Vivekananda and many others. In effect, the *Pacific Review* became an instrument for cultural and intellectual renaissance.

The newspaper fulfilled another function. It carried extensive news of political and cultural developments in the Indian subcontinent. The *Fiji Times'* coverage of the subcontinent's affairs was meagre and by and large dismissively critical. It reported borrowed items from western news sources that accentuated the negative: reports of communal strife, natural calamities, poverty, social tensions. From its pages, India appeared a place where nothing much good ever seemed to happen. The *Pacific Review* went in the other direction, highlighting the subcontinent's cultural and artistic achievements, progress in science and industry and India's role in international politics. Thus while the *Fiji Times* might publish an article on Hindu-Muslim conflict, the *Pacific Review* published, in 1955, an article which reported a speech of an Indian leader: 'We have today in India even after partition, nearly 40 million Muslims. Islam has affected not a little the language, literature, music and other fine arts—in fact every department of life in India.' Fostering pride among Fiji Indians in their ancestral culture formed an important cornerstone in Patel's and Swamiji's agenda.

Soon after its inception, the *Pacific Review* began publishing a Fijian version of itself, the *Vakalewa ni Pasifika*. The Fijian paper published translations from the *Pacific Review*, but it also included its own views on issues and events of particular interest to the Fijian community. The paper enabled Indian leaders to bypass the government controlled channels of communication with the Fijian people, and establish direct contact with them. It was a part of Patel's oft-repeated agenda to break down barriers between the two principal communities in Fiji. If only the two communities could understand each other, the problems

of Fiji would be solved, Patel used to say. Political communication apart, the newspaper also carried extensive items on Indian culture and history directly to the Fijian people. So the readers of the newspaper encountered translations from the great Hindu epics the Ramayana and the *Mahabharata*, life histories of Indian sages, poets and artists, the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, and the political achievements of Jawaharlal Nehru. Poems on these leaders appeared in Fijian. In short, the *VP* became a medium of public cross-cultural education, the first and so far the only experiment of its kind in Fiji's media history.

The newspaper also raised issues regarding human rights and political developments in Fiji. Patel wrote many of the paper's major editorials that touched on political and philosophical issues, particularly in the 1950s. In an editorial in January 1949, Patel castigated the United Kingdom for its colonial policies:

Time and again British statesmen in England have reiterated that the ultimate goal of British rule in the Crown colonies is self-government for the territories concerned. If that is really the goal, the least the British government can immediately do is to stop ruling these territories for the benefit of Great Britain and make the interests and welfare of the colonies the supreme objects of their rule.³¹

That was being idealistic. But Patel went on:

Fiji earns quite a substantial amount of dollars every year and it is only right and just that she should be free to make use of her dollars for her own needs. At present, Fiji is made to earn dollars for the benefit of Great Britain. Fiji can sell her sugar and copra to other countries at considerably higher prices than what the British Government gives her. It is high time that the British government stop treating Fiji as a closed shop of Great Britain and grant the people of Fiji fiscal and commercial autonomy.

That was a fantastic demand in the circumstances, but Patel was not one to be deterred by obstacles.

The colonial government itself did not escape Patel's censure for its unprogressive social and educational policies and for its constant 'emphasis on differences of race and culture' between the communities, 'ensuring that there was as little contact between the different sections of the population.'³² The colonial government should encourage a common outlook among all its citizens. Indians were born in Fiji, but they had no right to call themselves Fijians. 'If Europeans settled in

³¹ *Pacific Review*, 15 January 1949.

³² *Pacific Review*, 2 July 1959.

New Zealand and Australia can call themselves New Zealanders and Australians, if the European citizens of the USA can call themselves Americans, why on earth can Indian, European and Chinese citizens of Fiji not call themselves Fijians?’³³ A decade later Patel would move that the indigenous Fijians should be called taukei and everyone should be called Fijian. Patel also criticised the colonial government for its handling of the land issue. A particularly sore point was the reservation of Fijian land. The Native Lands Ordinance of 1940 had provided that, in return for agreeing to let the NLTB lease their lands on their behalf, the government would ensure that sufficient lands would be put in reserve for exclusive Fijian use. It was intended that the work of reserving land for Fijians would be completed within ten years. Instead, it dragged on for nearly twenty years, causing much hardship all around, particularly among the displaced Indian tenants who had to find somewhere else to settle. Patel did not quarrel with the reserve policy itself, but raised a number of related concerns.

Among them were compensation and the resettlement of the evictees.³⁴ The Native Lands Trust Board’s position was outlined by its secretary G.J.T. Hansen in a memorandum published on 18 November 1949. The Board would allow a tenant, who had been given the notice of eviction, in accordance with the reserve policy, to harvest all his standing crops planted before the notice of non-renewal, and to remain on the land until the Board made the final decision after consulting with the Resettlement Committee regarding an alternative site for the evictee. The NLTB would do all it could to assist with resettlement, provided that this did not conflict with its primary objective of protecting the interests of the Fijian people; but it made it clear that ‘the question of rehabilitation of dispossessed farmers is not a matter for the Board.’ Finally, and perhaps most controversially, the NLTB said that because ‘past methods of farming on leased native lands have not led to any permanent improvements in such lands,’ it would ‘not be prepared to consider the question of compensation for improvements to such lands.’ That was just like the Native Lands Trust Board, Patel said, for “who else would put forward such an excuse to confiscate tenant’s improvements.” He continued: ‘If the Board really believes the correctness of its opinion it would have certainly declared without beating around the bush that it was willing to pay for permanent improvements, if any, in the event of the non-renewal of the lease. Nobody then could have questioned the fair mindedness on the part of the Board’.

But it was patently untrue that the tenants had not made any permanent improvements on their leases, Patel argued. Even first class lands were acquired originally by payment of quite heavy premia to the native owners and then brought under cultivation by uprooting and clearing thick jungles of guava,

³³ *Pacific Review*, 2 July 1959.

³⁴ See *Pacific Review*, 3 and 17 September, 15 October and 26 November 1949.

vai and other bushes hard and expensive to eradicate. In the first few years of their tenancy, the farmers struggled hard to make both ends meet. It was years of intensive cultivation and heavy manuring with coral sand, chemical and green manures which created some of the first class lands the farmers now' cultivated. Besides building up the fertility of the land, the tenants had planted coconut, mango, tamarind, orange, mandarin, jack fruit and other such crops which would yield rich harvests in the future. In many areas they had borne heavy costs building tramlines to take cane to the main line and from there to the mills. They had also been contributing substantial amounts annually to the Price Stabilisation Fund, the benefit of which would be enjoyed by the dispossessing landlords.' Was this the kind of 'past methods' of farming the Board had in mind? 'If the Board does not like the native lands as they are at present would they like the tenants, before they hand over the lands, to exhaust all improvements, cut down or dig out all valuable trees and turn into a veritable bush as it was when originally leased? Expropriating landlordism never runs short of excuses to swallow up what rightfully belongs to its tenants. But the excuse put forward by the Native Lands Trust Board is unique. It condemns its own creator.'

Where was justice, Patel asked, when the Fijian landlords were not only allowed to take their lands back, but also confiscate the improvements made by the Indian tenants? The landowners, Patel continued, should be duty-bound to pay the full value of the un-exhausted improvements. The government itself was morally bound to resettle the dispossessed farmers and help them with loans to get started. Why? 'The dispossessed farmer will not be allowed to mortgage his lease and as there will be no improvements on the lands which he can pledge, he will be thrown on the rapacity of usurious money lenders.' 'This procrastination on the part of the Government,' Patel said, 'has created deep resentment amongst the farmers.'

For its part, the government rejected the charge of procrastination. In mid-1949, it had created a Resettlement Committee in the western division, chaired by the District Commissioner Western and consisting of the District Engineer Lautoka C.L. Langdale, C.E. Whitehead, Roko Tui Nadroga and Navosa, E.A. Potts and T.R. Sharma. The committee was asked to assist displaced tenants find accommodation outside the reserves and recommend to the Central Resettlement Committee lands which might be available for them. On paper, the government's proposals looked attractive, but again, there were questions. How exactly was the committee going to help the displaced tenants, Patel asked? 'It is well known that none of the members of the Committee has the means, authority or power to procure resettlement of the displaced tenants even if they had the best intentions of being helpful to the unfortunate tenants.' Would they intercede on their behalf for compensation for the improvements left behind, and seek

out new leases for them on suitable but unoccupied land, or were they going to help provide funds to enable the displaced farmer start afresh? In short, the Resettlement Committee was a futile exercise, for the government knew all along what the problems were, and yet neither it nor the Native Land Trust Board had made preparations to meet an emergency which should have been foreseen at least ten years before. Instead of persuading the Fijian owners of the Reserves to wait until the Government had made proper arrangements for the evicted tenants, it had put the cart before the horse by throwing the tenants out of their old homes before finding them new homes. He said, sarcastically: 'What the Government did not or could not provide in a decade the Committee is expected to produce like a conjurer out of his hat on the spot. Though we do not believe in magic, we wish it good luck.'

The reserves policy and the problems it created for the Indian tenants generated intense emotion in the Indian community. Those evicted had to start all over again, often without any assistance. Meanwhile, their formerly productive land often reverted to bush. The friction created by the reserves policy, together with the increase in the size of the Indian population surpassing the Fijians during the war, created widespread hostility among Europeans and other self-styled champions of the Fijian people. A. A. Ragg was among them. He continued his interminable correspondence with the Colonial Office, telling all of the inevitable Indian domination of Fiji and the eventual dispossession of the Fijian people in their own land. He recommended a program of deporting Indians from Fiji. His friend, A.W. Macmillan, a former Inspector of Indian schools in Fiji retired in Tauranga, New Zealand, recommended the malaria-infested Sepik River valley of the New Guinea Highlands as a suitable destination for Fiji Indians. R.W. Robson, the publisher of the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, pointed to Marquesas as a possible destination where, he suggested, the Indians might end up by 'clawing each other to death/ but at least Fiji would revert to being the paradise it once was and so richly deserved to become.

Most Indian leaders rejected this alarmist rhetoric. Responded Patel in 1952: 'Like the red rag to the bull, the Indian problem in Fiji seems to send some people into an excitement and rage which deprives them of the power of thinking. And obviously well-meaning friends, on whom the White Man's burden sits heavy indeed, are busy planning solutions to imaginary problems and tilting at windmills.'³⁵ Two years later, by which time the anti-Indian hysteria had still not abated, Patel wrote scathingly of people like Ragg and Robson. Whatever such people think, said Patel, 'the Fijians and Indians consider their persons and property as valuable as those of their European compatriots and under no

35 *Pacific Review*, 8 August 1952.

circumstances are they going to offer their skulls to be broken, or their properties turned into bonfire by one another as a benefit performance for the delight of the diehard propagandists.'

Do these propagandists ever stop to realise that the arguments they use to incite the Fijians against the Indians are in the nature of a boomerang with the tendency to recoil on themselves? For instance, when they talk of 'land grabbers,' the Fijians very well know who have completely gobbled up half a million acres of the best Fijian lands for almost a song. They know who fooled their fathers into selling hundreds of acres of their very best lands in return for a box of matches, a bottle of liquor, a musket or a piece of cloth. If the Fijians have only second best lands left for their own use, they very well know who licked the cream off their milk. From this leftover of their ancestral inheritance they have reserved first rate land for their own use and rented out the surplus to the Indians through a board of trustees, of which the Governor himself is the president. When the propagandists talk of the exploitation of the Fijians' lands, the Fijians immediately think of the gold mines and all the gold taken out therefrom every year without payment of a single cent to the Fijian owners of the land. When they talk about the increase of the Indian population, their minds naturally turn to the great epidemic of measles which almost wiped out their numbers, and they also know who are responsible for it. When these propagandists try to run the Indians down in the eyes of the Fijians, they overlook the patent fact that they and their forebears were responsible for the introduction of Indians in this Colony. The government of the day only did what the European planters asked them to do. If the Indians are such a bad people as these diehards make them out, the guilt of introducing these people into Fiji lies squarely on the greedy shoulders of the European masters, who placed orders with the government for the importation of these labourers. In these days of fundamental rights of human beings the Fijian knows who denies him those rights and keeps him behind.³⁶

Unfortunately for Patel, if Fijians knew these truths, they were not speaking out publicly. For the most part, they closed ranks behind their chiefs and the colonial establishment. To these Fijians, Patel posed a number of questions. Why, he asked, were Fijians lagging behind the other communities, 'condemned to a state of inferiority in their dealings with other races in the economic life of this Colony' when the literacy rate among them was almost 90 per cent, and when they were, by far, the biggest landlords in the colony? Why were there not more Fijian boat builders and sailors, dominating the inter-island communications network, when in precession days 'the Fijians were famous in these waters for their skill in building canoes which braved the high seas, as well as for their

36 *Pacific Review*, 15 January 1954.

seamanship?’ Why were the Fijians still living in grass huts, ‘the building and repairs of which take up most of their working time, while others manage their lands and exploit its mineral and forest resources’?

These questions went to the heart of Fiji’s (and the Fijian peoples’) problem. For Ragg and others like him, the main cause of the problems facing the Fijian people was the visibly increasing Indian population. Control the birthrate, and all the other problems would take care of themselves. Many Fijians thought likewise. But for Patel, the root cause of the predicament facing the Fijian people lay elsewhere, in the minutely defined and stringently enforced Fijian regulations which had reduced the Fijian people ‘to a perpetual state of infancy in their economic relations with the rest of their fellow citizens,’ and ‘chained them to a primitive way of life and to a social and political order which is anything but democratic.’ These regulations, which were finally abolished in 1966, defined the limits of the Fijians social and material existence, the things they could and could not do without official approval. As Patel said, ‘We cry hoarse over extolling the virtues of private enterprise and running down communism, but when it comes to the Fijians we side with the chiefs and sing praises of the Fijian brand of communism and exhort them to keep clinging to it in the name of tradition and custom.’ If the Fijian people were to succeed, Patel argued, they had to be granted more freedom to participate in the economic life of the colony, especially the Fijian commoners.

There was an Indian problem in Fiji, Patel agreed, but with a difference. While the Indian people had contributed to the economic development of the country, they had not contributed to its cultural and artistic development. That was the Indian problem. The Indians had a rich cultural heritage, ‘which places service above self, and things of the spirit above material things, which fosters a catholicity of outlook and a dynamic spirit of tolerance.’ So the challenge before the Indian people was: ‘How they can worthily contribute their stream of Indian culture to the cultural life of this great colony and the Pacific Isles.’ Why, Patel asked on several occasions, should only the Europeans be regarded as the protectors of the Fijian interest, who had used their access to the Fijian people to divide the two races for their own interests? The welfare of the Fijian people was as much a concern of the Indian community, Patel argued, as it was of the Europeans and the colonial state.