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Race and Power Struggle in Fiji

Amba Pande

After his unprecedented victory in the May 1999 General Elections Mr. Mahendra Pal Chaudhary, the leader of Fiji Labour Party (FLP) in his first statement as Prime Minister of Fiji had said, "The Fiji Labour Party is truly humbled by the magnitude of this support, it is overwhelming and the fact that it comes from a good cross-section of our people confirms our faith in Fiji as a truly multiracial society." He further added, "Our emphasis now must shift to that of building a secure multiracial foundation for our country and not on propagating communal politics."¹ The event was seen as a 'political metamorphosis' and was applauded all over the world. But at the same time there were doubts too, as to whether or not ethnic Fijians would accept a person of Indian origin as their leader. Jai Ram Reddy, a veteran Indo-Fijian political leader of National Federation Party (NFP) and leader of opposition in Fiji's House of Representatives for several years, still believed that the type of multiracialism Mr. Chaudhary is dreaming about will not happen.² But Chaudhary was adamant, "I have to put the Constitution at test,"³ he had said and also, "I think we are trying to move away from the communal politics and this is the first opportunity to attempt that.... If we don't, we will for ever be shackled in this divisive communalism,"⁴ he insisted defying both his advisors and critics in his resolve to take the top post of the country. In his attempt to dispel the fear and distrust in Fijian minds he tried to convince them by saying, "You have nothing to fear from the Fiji Labour Party, your special rights as an indigenous community are well entrenched in the Constitution. They will be respected and observed by the Fiji Labour Party."⁵

But these assurances could not convince everyone and the doubts proved to be true. Exactly one year after assumption of power his government was overthrown in a civilian coup led by George Speight. A

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few masked gunmen led by a power hungry and failed businessman raided the parliament and seized 31 hostages including Mahendra Chaudhary. To add to the confusion the Fijian President Ratu Sir Kamasesse Mara dismissed the popularly elected government. Further, on May 29 the military under Commodore Frank Bainimarama staged a counter coup, declared Martial Law and assumed executive powers. But soon after the military began to yield to the dictates of Speight, conceded all his major demands thereby putting its own credentials to question. In fact, the back-tracking had begun with the Great Council of Chiefs led by Sitiveni Rabuka partially agreeing to Speight's demands favouring Chaudhary's dismissal and alteration of the Constitution. Thus abetted by the feudal Chiefs and the Martial Law regime the rebels have dragged Fiji back towards a racially intolerant past.

The most common and simple explanation for the coup led by George Speight has been that it is a simple racial conflict between the Indians and the Fijians. But a glance at the history and an in-depth analysis of the crisis, reflect that the issues involved are much more complex than what people otherwise think. A simplistic racial interpretation is inadequate as well as misleading. Dr. Brijlal, an eminent expert on Fiji rightly says, "I certainly challenge the idea that this is only about race because there are so many other factors involved."⁶

As a matter of fact, the coming to power of the Labour Party which was founded on the principle of multiracialism and also the fact that it was the third time in the history of independent Fiji that an Indian dominated multiracial party had won the General Elections (i.e. 1977, 1987 and 1999) is clear enough evidence to show that people have voted across racial lines and that there are more important issues involved than race for the people of Fiji. Race obviously is a crucial factor in the analysis of the politics of Fiji, but the problem is aggravated by vested interests to fulfill their own objectives. Slogans like "Fiji for the Fijians" and threat to land are used to exacerbate the already existing problems. However, the fact is that the ongoing conflict may be more accurately seen as a result of the power struggle between feudalism on the one hand and the rising middle class on the other. Between traditionalism on the one hand and modernism on the other. Between politically powerful eastern feudals on the one hand and prosperous inhabitants of western Fiji on the other. As Teresia Teaiwa, a lecturer in Pacific Studies at the Victoria University of Wellington puts it, "The real struggle is amongst indigenous Fijians, and it is continually masked by the rhetoric of a racial conflict between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians."⁷

This paper attempts to analyse the struggle for power and ascendancy

among the native Fijian groups and how the race card has been played, making the Indo-Fijians a convenient scapegoat. The latest reports of involvement of the granddaughter of an eastern Chief in the coup, vindicates the point being discussed in the paper.

Historical Background

Situated in the South Pacific, Fiji lies on the 180° Meridian. It comprises over 300 islands with a population of about 802,611. The two major islands in the group are known as Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. At the time of arrival of the first European adventurers in the early 19th century the Fijians were divided into small chiefdoms. The social and political background of the early Fijians was diverse. Even today considerable variance exists in the nature of the social set up of the western and eastern Fijians. In the eastern islands they are grouped in large chiefdoms with strong hierarchies supported by ritual observances. The Chiefs are known as 'High Chiefs'. In the west the political units are smaller and less viable and are segmental rather than hierarchical. At the time of colonisation in 1874, eastern Fijians had well established contacts with missionaries and traders. The Deed of Secession was signed by all the important Chiefs (basically belonging to the eastern side).⁸ This Deed was not universally accepted and the people of western and central areas had rebelled fearing the domination by eastern Chiefs, but the rebellion was crushed. The first British Governor of the colony established a regime to protect the Fijian society and in order to achieve that he issued strict restrictions for recruitment of Fijians in the plantations and confirmed Fijian ownership of 83 per cent of the land. He also, 'standardised the Fijian social structure by the innovation of Council of Chiefs which became the basis of Fijian administration, and an instrument of chiefly domination.'⁹ Such a system of administration became an additional source of power for the Chiefs. Moreover, bureaucratic management of traditional land and the rights to control it further strengthened the position of the Chiefs. The Fijians were thus condemned to the tutelage of their own Chiefs.¹⁰

Fiji's colonial economy was based primarily on sugar and the sugar industry. The political power obtained by the eastern Chiefs due to their alliance with the colonial masters and concentration of the sugar industry, gold mines and best tourist resorts in the western side gave rise to a pattern of unequal development. While western Fiji became the backbone of the economy, political power remained in the east. This resulted in a sense of resentment in the western side. However, since the Britishers needed a labour force for their plantations, the necessity was felt to import

labour from the colonies (especially India which was already providing indentured labour to other British colonies like South Africa etc.). The recruitment began in 1879 and by the time it ended in 1916, there were around 61,000 indentured labour on the Fijian soil. The majority of them (around 45,000) came from the impoverished districts of eastern Uttar Pradesh (such as Basti, Gonda, and Faizabad). The remaining 15,000 came from the emigration prone districts of South India such as North Arcot, Chingleput, and Madras. The deed which was called 'Girmit' (hence the labourers came to be known as 'Girmityas') was signed initially for a period of five years but the labourers were forced to extend it for another five years. At the end of ten years they were allowed to return either to India or to remain in Fiji. When this system ended in 1916 the majority of these labourers decided to stay on.¹¹ While working as labourers on British plantations, the condition of Indians was almost like slaves. The British were indifferent to their problems. But the Indians were loyal to the British and were industrious and harmless so long as they were allowed to live separately maintaining their links with mother India.¹² The Fijian economic system was such that most of the Indo-Fijians were employed in sugarcane operations concentrated in western Fiji while most of the indigenous Fijians were confined to their traditional occupations in their villages.

Over the years, the Indians in Fiji prospered. Their century old presence in the island country has been a success story, which has remained the major source of resentment against them. But as late Dr. Timoci Bavadra, leader of the Fiji Labour Party and the deposed Prime Minister during the 1987 had once said that, If some people are not well off, that is not the fault of some other race.¹³ Another expert on Fiji, Stephanie Hegan has explained this situation as "Gordon introduced a form of indirect rule by way of a separate native administration which while doing much to preserve the indigenous culture and way of life, was to keep Fijians in an economic backwater and in a relative isolation from the mainstream of colonial politics. Indeed, it can be argued that these effects are largely responsible for many of the economic problems that the Fijians continue to experience but which are frequently blamed on the Fiji Indian community which has become a convenient scapegoat".¹⁴

Under colonial rule, the British evolved separate local administrations for Indo-Fijians and ethnic Fijians. They kept the two ethnic groups divided and protected the feudal elements of the society to safeguard economic and political interests of the commercial lobby. Following the policy of 'Divide and Rule', they maintained and inspired the belief that the Indians who had multiplied and outnumbered all others in the

population, held a predominant share of economic power and if they were given equal political rights, they would take over the country which legitimately belonged to the Fijians.¹⁵

In 1966 a new constitution was introduced by the British in Fiji which provided for a ministerial form of government; with an almost wholly elected Legislative Council. The British had adopted a system of communal rolls which meant that people were divided into separate electorates on the basis of their ethnic groups. In September 1967 the Executive Council became the Council of Ministers, with Ratu Kamisese Mara leader of the Alliance Party and a powerful eastern Chief as Fiji's first Chief Minister. Two major political parties emerged during that time namely—The National Federation Party (NFP) with its support base predominantly among Indo-Fijians and the Alliance Party with its support base among indigenous Fijians. However by the time of independence the Alliance Party was mainly under the control of the eastern Chiefs.

On October 10, 1970 Fiji became independent after a prolonged discussion in the London Conference. A constitution was adopted in April 1970 which provided Fiji with a parliamentary form of democracy based on the Westminster model. It provided a bicameral legislative with one of the most complex legislative systems of the world. The Lower House, which was called the House of Representatives, had 52 members. Among these, 12 Fijians, 12 Indians and 3 General members were to be elected on the basis of communal voters roll. Other than that, 10 more Fijians, 10 Indians and 8 General members had to be elected on national roll. The members under General category represented minority communities. Each voter had a total of four votes, one in the communal electorate and three (one for each social grouping) in the national electorate. The Upper House was called the Senate which had 22 members—8 nominated by the Council of Chiefs, 7 by the Prime Minister, 6 as the opposition leader's nominees and 1 was to be the nominee of Council of Ratuma. The special representation given to the Council of Chiefs in the Senate was of most crucial significance in establishing supremacy of Fijian interests. The constitution gave veto power to any three nominees of 'Council of Chiefs', effective veto over any legislative attempt to interfere with core Fijian interests such as land, customs and way of life. The constitution also guaranteed to the indigenous Fijians, the traditional rights over 80 per cent of the country's land. The elected House of Representatives had no rights over these provisions. Thus "the outwardly symmetrical parity of ethnic representation was more than outweighed by defence of Fijian interests through the composition and powers of the nominated Senate".¹⁶

Following the system of communal electoral roll before independence, the Fijians even after independence followed the same pattern. Under this condition, it was absolutely impossible to achieve a reasonable basis for representation based on majority rule. But it was carried out by the British in the guise of protecting the Fijian interests. The NFP had always opposed the system of communal representation. In fact, "The National Federation Party insisted from the beginning that the right of the majority must be accepted. The only proper way to identify a majority was to establish the principle of one man one vote".¹⁷ But this idea was rejected by most of the Fijians on the ground that it might dilute their political identity. They also feared to place the numerically and economically strong Indians on an equal footing. It may be noted here that at the time of independence Indians outnumbered the Fijians. Thus ultimately, the NFP had to accept the system of communal roll in order to allay the Fijian fears of Indian domination. In the elections thus held in 1972, Alliance Party won the majority and Ratu Mara became the first Prime Minister of independent Fiji. In the words of Shanti Sadiq Ali, "Although the 1970 constitution was not a perfect document, the Indo-Fijians co-operated with ethnic Fijians to create a society which was described as 'the way the world should be'.¹⁸

During the second General Elections held in 1977, the NFP won majority of seats (26 out of 52 seats) in the House of Representatives, but failed to form the government due to its internal dissensions. In this situation Ratu Mara was invited to govern in a caretaker capacity until the next General Elections. In the same year when elections were held, the Alliance Party of Ratu Mara returned to power with a huge majority. Race was always a factor during all the General Elections and it was also manifested in the appeals for votes. During his election campaign Ratu Mara accused the NFP of getting support from India. He managed to sow seeds of suspicion against NFP. Hence, the democratic ideas professed by the NFP came to be regarded as being against Fijian interests. Thus racial issues came to be associated with general debate over democracy. The Chiefs based their anti-democratic position on appeals to preserve tradition and native Fijian rights in the face of the assumed threat from Indo-Fijians.

The issue of land was another factor which was used as a tool against the NFP. In fact the root of the land politics in Fiji goes back to the pre-independence period. It was one of the most contentious issues in the Fijian-Indian relations. More than 83 per cent of the land was owned by the ethnic Fijians but as the main commercial cultivators of sugarcane, Indians held most of the land as tenant farmers on a lease of 99 years

(most of which are now coming for renewal). Despite the fact that the land was legally made inalienable by the constitution of 1970, the fear of losing it had always been there in the minds of the Fijians. But it is important to note here that the Indians actually never challenged the customary rights of the Fijian people. In fact, they always accepted the special position given to Fijians in their own country, including their rights to ownership of the land. However, the major concern with respect to land has always been with adequate agricultural leases and that has also been in the interest of the Fijian economy to ensure some security of tenure for Indo-Fijian farmers. But in later years the ever present "bogey of Indian land grab" was used by the ruling elite to maintain Fijian support base.¹⁹

In the General Elections of 1982 Ratu Mara's Alliance Party again came to power but with a reduced majority. However, there was a great deal of discontent with the Ratu Mara government over rising inflation and unemployment. Also the economic development was lopsided which favoured the eastern side. The economic measures adopted by the government to meet the crisis brought it into direct confrontation with the trade unions and as a result of this the trade union movement became stronger. One of the largest trade unions had Dr. Timoci Bavadra as its President and Mahendra Chaudhary as its National Secretary. The Fijian Labour Party was formed in July 1985 by these two leaders. The new party had its base mainly among three classes i.e. urban Fijians (who were the greatest sufferers of inflation and unemployment), western Fijians (who despite having the bulk of the sugar industry were deprived of adequate development and political power) and the Indo- Fijians (who despite owning the bulk of the sugar industry, were sufferers of the economic policies of the government). Moreover, due to industrialisation and urbanisation a number of Fijians had moved away from the villages weakening the traditional hold of the feudal system. These enlightened urban Fijians faced a lot of common problems together with other ethnic groups and found it beneficial to form links with them. Thus the Labour Party had its support base in the cross section of the society and the idea of multiracialism it stood for, came to appear as a truth in the otherwise racially divided society. The issues of common concern became so important that the rhetoric of Fijian identity or threat of Indian domination could no longer hold water. The new party made several welfare schemes like free education and national medical scheme as its priorities.

At the General Elections in April 1987 a coalition of FLP and NFP won 28 seats in the House of Representatives, 19 of whom were won by ethnic Indians. Dr. Bavadra and his Cabinet were sworn in by the

Governor General Ratu Sir Panaia Ganilau. Dr. Bavadra's Cabinet included 7 Indo-Fijians, 6 Fijians and 1 European. It was for the first time in Fijian history that the Indians were given an equal role in the governance of the country.

However, showing little regard for democratic principles, a coup led by Lt.-Col. Sitiveni Rabuka (belonging to a warrior clan of eastern Fiji) was staged on May 14, 1987. The Governor General Ganilau declared a state of emergency and appointed a 19 member advisory council which included both Rabuka and Dr. Bavadra. However Dr. Bavadra refused to participate on the grounds that the composition of the council was unconstitutional and biased. Widespread racial violence followed the coup. Though there were some anti coup protests also and demands were made to reinstate Bavadra, in July 1987 the Great Council of Chiefs approved plans for constitutional reforms and under the initiatives of Governor General Ganilau the two former Prime Ministers Dr. Bavadra and Ratu Mara agreed to form a bipartisan interim government. But on September 25, 1987 a second coup was staged by Rabuka. He declared Fiji a Republic and proclaimed himself the head of the state thereby deposing the Queen. Ganilau had to resign, Rabuka also revoked the constitution and formed an interim cabinet comprising mainly ethnic Fijians. The regime assumed the power of detention without trial and suspended all political activities.

As a matter of fact a conspiracy to destabilise the government started even before it properly assumed power. At first glance the coup appeared to be a racist reaction by ethnic Fijians and indeed race was a factor but there were other factors involved as well. The feudal Chiefs (especially eastern) who were the major beneficiaries during the long rule of the Alliance Party felt that their traditional dominance over Fijian society and economic interests were also at stake. As Anthony J. Payne explains it "The problem was that these old men had come to believe that the government of Fiji was their natural fiefdom. Led for many years by Ratu Mara the Fijian ruling elite was simply unable to tolerate the existence of FLP and the coalition as a government."²⁰

Dr. Brij V. Lal has referred to the coup of 1987 as 'an outcome of supremacy of traditionalism'. He further adds "both Bavadra's class and regional origin posed the danger for traditional scheme of things in Fijian society. Dr. Bavadra belonged to the middle class and was from western part of the country."²¹ In the words of another writer J. Sandy on Fiji "The coup of 1987 overthrew a newly elected multiracial government and reinstalled the former Fijian elite led regime which espoused the traditional order and the 'Fijian way' yet also aimed to preserve its own privileged position in both Fijian society and modern economy".²²

The issue of land which was already a sensitive issue in Fijian politics was made an instrument to mobilise the Fijians against the Bavadra government. An indigenous Fijian movement called 'Taukei' (meaning our land) Movement was started by ultranationalists. The movement having got the networking of the Alliance Party, spread rapidly throughout the country. Massive demonstrations were held against the new government. In fact the government had done absolutely nothing to threaten any aspect of Fijian land which in any case was constitutionally safeguarded in the Senate. In a sense land became an 'anticipatory issue' meaning that it was expected by the Fijians that sooner or later the new government would begin to tamper with the Fijian land tenure and operations of the National Land Trust Board (NLTB).²³ The post-coup period was one of trauma and turmoil for the ethnic Indians. The professionals, the businessmen and those who could obtain emigrant visas left Fiji for other countries thereby bringing in demographic change, which ended their predominant position.

The constitution which was adopted by the interim government in spite of the protests by Indo-Fijians was highly discriminatory against them. The interim government was formed on December 7, 1987. As Head of the State, Ganilau became the first President of the Fijian Republic. Ratu Mara was reappointed as the Prime Minister and Rabuka became the Minister of Home Affairs. A new interim Cabinet was also formed which included 11 members of Rabuka's earlier Cabinet. A new constitution was promulgated by the Cabinet in 1990. According to the new constitution, there was to be a bicameral legislative with an Upper House known as 'Senate' and a Lower House, called the 'House of Representatives'. The Lower House was to have 69 popularly elected members from communal constituencies, of which 37 were allocated to Fijians, 27 to Indo-Fijians and 5 to others. In the Senate the 'Great Council of Chiefs' was to nominate ethnic Fijians to 24 out of the total of 34 seats. The Senate played an important role in protecting the Fijian interests in Parliament especially in decisions to alter or repeal any constitutional provisions affecting the Fijians or their land, customs, traditions etc. The Senate was also empowered to appoint President of the republic (for a term of 5 years) and the Prime Minister from among the Fijians.

Thus, the constitution of 1990 set up a form of elective parliamentary government but even the most generous interpretations could not deny the fact that it was discriminatory and non-democratic. In the words of Dr. M.M. Kaul, "From the composition of the Parliament it is clear that Indians were relegated to a position from where they could not attempt to ever become politically powerful."²⁴ In the words of another scholar Rod Aley, the 1990 constitution was, "Palpably unfair to the island's

Indo-Fijian population as well as to urban Fijians. The 1990 constitution deterred badly needed inward investment and was faced with a number of other problems.²⁵ Urban Fijians although constituting one third of the indigenous population were only allotted 5 of the 37 seats in the House of Representatives. Hence the constitution was opposed by both NFP and the FLP and they announced that they would not participate in any elections to be held under it. Rabuka on the other hand justified the discriminatory nature of the constitution on the grounds that it was meant to redress the political and economic inequality between Fijians and Indo-Fijians.²⁶

The constitution was finally promulgated on July 25, 1990 by President Ganilau. In the legislative elections held in 1992 and again in 1994, Rabuka's Party SVT (formed by the Great Chiefs and reflecting the ideas of Taukei movement) came to power with Rabuka as the Prime Minister. But during his tenure Rabuka faced numerous problems. The negative effect of the racist constitution had resulted in a huge capital outflow, which considerably affected the economy. The economic policies followed by the new government led to a great deal of unrest among the workers and strikes were held over wages and poor working conditions all over Fiji. Meanwhile racial tensions were also exacerbated during that period, several attacks were reported on Hindu temples. The issue of land also came to the forefront. Rabuka also aroused some controversy over corruption charges.

Rabuka, trying to win over the situation invited opposition leaders Jai Ram Reddy of the NFP and Mahendra Chaudhary of the FLP to form a government of National Unity, which the Indo-Fijians declined. Hence Rabuka announced the formation of a Constitutional Review Commission, which it was hoped would complete a review of the constitution by 1997. Moreover, the economic plight of both urban and rural Fijians forced Rabuka to revise his earlier constitution to permit Indians to share power. Actually, due to a general economic downturn the racist card had lost its appeal. The Rabuka government therefore had no hope of retaining power and the only way for him and his SVT Party was to make a peace pact with the Indo-Fijian community by restoring some of their democratic rights.²⁷ Apart from this the international concern regarding continued existence of Fiji's racially biased constitution and its subsequent economic isolation had forced Rabuka to adopt amendments in the constitution.²⁸

On the other hand in order to pacify the Fijian nationalists and the Great Council of Chiefs who accused him of conceding too much to Indo-Fijians, Rabuka took only ethnic Fijians in his Cabinet. The next year he also announced that all the state land (around 10 per cent of the total Fijian land) was to be transferred to the Native Lands Trust Board.

During the early 90's another land related grievance came up from the Indian side. There were reports that the Indo - Fijian leases would not be renewed (most of which were due to expire between 1997 and 2024). Moreover, a newly formed ethnic sugarcane growers association known as the Taukei Cane Growers Association campaigned for ethnic control over the sugar industry and to make their land leased to Indo-Fijians available for their own use. In this regard they demanded abolition of ALTA (Agricultural Land Lords And Tenants Act) Land Legislation. The expiry of leases became a pressing social and economic problem as thousands of Indo-Fijian tenant farmers faced the problem of being displaced from the plots they had held for generations. In 1995 Jai Ram Reddy had blasted delays in negotiations on this issue saying "My worst fears are that there would be wide spread dislocation of farmers from all category of lands when their leases expire, without adequate advance planning on their resettlement".²⁹

However amidst all these upheavals in September 1996 the report of constitutional Review Commissions was presented in the House of Representatives. There was extreme opposition from the nationalist parties but with some modifications, the constitution was approved unanimously by the House of Representatives and the Senate on July 3 and 10, 1997. The main provisions of the Constitution were that it declared Fiji to be a sovereign Democratic Republic, which guaranteed to all citizens fundamental rights, a universal adult suffrage and equality before law. It provided a parliamentary form of government with bicameral legislative, comprising a House of Representatives with 71 elected members and a Senate with 32 appointed members; 46 seats in the Lower House were reserved on racial basis (23 for ethnic Fijians, 19 for Indians, 3 for other races and 1 for Rotuma Islanders) and remaining 25 seats were open to all. The Senate was to be appointed by the President on the advice of Council of Chiefs (14 members), Prime Minister (4 members), leaders of opposition (8 members) and Rotuma Island Council (1 member). Thus the Constitution of 1998 found an interesting balance. Fijians, Hindustani and General voters were given equal status in the state. Other than the ownership of Fijian land and the rights of Fijian and Rotuma people, were specific articles in the Constitution. It was in fact an amalgam of ideas which brought diverse people together in an interestingly just manner. It was an unique experiment in a complex situation.³⁰

Following the adoption of the new Constitution Fiji was back on the path of reconciliation and co-existence. It was readmitted to the Commonwealth in October 1997 and Rabuka was granted an audience with Queen Elizabeth II in London. Diplomatic relations with India also

improved considerably and in October 1997 the Indian government invited Fiji to open its High Commission in New Delhi. In June 1998 India announced that it would reopen its High Commission in Suva.

Elections were conducted on the basis of the new Constitution in May 1999 in which the FLP under Mahendra Chaudhary led People's Coalition (other partners were the Fijian Association and the Party of National Unity) came to power. Out of the total 71 seats in the House of Representatives, People's Coalition got 52 seats (37 went to the FLP alone). Although the FLP had enough seats to form the government on its own but Mahendra Chaudhary treaded cautiously and acted adroitly. Not only did he include his alliance partners but also Ratu Su Kamisese Mara's daughter and her Christian Democratic Alliance into his government. Another commendable step undertaken by Chaudhary was to allocate portfolios central to Fijian interests to ethnic Fijians. Ministry of Fijian Affairs, Agriculture, Fisheries & Forests, Tourism etc. all went to ethnic Fijians most of whom were not even members of the FLP. Twelve out of 18 members of the sacked cabinet were ethnic Fijians. Even among Speight's hostages 14 of the 31 members were ethnic Fijians. Thus the Chaudhary government was in no sense a sectarian government but was a genuine cultural mix. It reflected a triumph of multiracialism over racism. Rabuka had accused Indo-Fijians of bloc voting in favour of FLP but the fact was that Mahendra Chaudhary was a popular leader at that time. In an opinion poll conducted six months after taking office he was rated as most popular leader with 65 per cent of votes.³¹ But perhaps one unwise move on the part of Chaudhary which did not go down well with the people was to appoint his son Rajendra as his Private Secretary. The FLP had come to power with a promise to provide fair administration free of nepotism, which was prevalent during Rabuka's government.³²

However, the land remained the most contentious issue throughout Chaudhary's rule. Tensions had been building for months. Thousands of indigenous Fijians had begun protests under the ultranationalist Taukei banner. Criticism centered mainly on attempts by Chaudhary to persuade Fijian Land owners to renew expiring leases.³³ Every move of the government to find a solution for settlement was blocked by the opposition groups. As a matter of fact land was made a tool to bring down the Chaudhary government.³⁴ The idea of taking over sugar farms when the leases expire is also supported by Speight. The interim Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase in his first statements also talked of removal of native land from the ambit of ALTA thereby making the renewal of leases by ethnic Fijians non-mandatory.³⁵

Conclusion

Thus it is most unfortunate that in an attempt to hold on to power the feudal elements of Fiji have successfully projected the Indians as 'villains'. In the present coup by George Speight the issues involved are not only the denial to the Indo-Fijians of their legitimate political rights but also the attempt to strike at their economic backbone by taking away the land they have farmed for generations. But what the power brokers in Fiji must realise is that non-renewal of leases would not only cause destruction to the Indians, but also to the sugar industry which brings a major portion of the country's foreign exchange and substantial part of the government revenue.

Moreover, it is not only the question of renewal of land leases but as a matter of fact Indians have every right to own land in Fiji and it is a great injustice to prevent them from doing so. As Salman Rushdie puts it, "The truth is that after 100 years, Fiji Indians have every right to think of themselves as being and to be treated as being, fully as ethnic as ethnic Fijians."³⁶

Indians on their part should try to assimilate themselves more and more into their country of adoption. There is a need to make judicious use of their economic and political skills by the Indo Fijians to develop partnerships with the ethnic people and make a conscious effort to win them over. Fiji is their home and they should break the myth that they owe allegiance to India. Fleeing the country can never be a solution to the existing problem. In fact, it will put them in a more disadvantageous position by tilting the demographic balance against them. They have to realise that their fight is not for an equal status but against something much more deep. They will have to make common cause with the rising middle class and enlightened people to expose the power hungry feudal elements of society. There are reports that the people of the western side do not approve of Speight's action and talks of secession have already begun. After his release Mahendra Chaudhary has restarted his campaign concentrating more on the western side.

On their part the ethnic Fijians should also realise that Indo-Fijians are an inalienable part of that land. Reducing them to a status of second-class citizens is not going to solve the problems of ethnic Fijians in any way. If they are facing economic hardships it is not because Indo-Fijians are prosperous. Their problem lies somewhere among themselves. Their real fight is against their own people. It is easy to incite the frustrated elements of society against emigrants especially if they are prosperous. But the kind of political culture where a handful of hoodlums can hold a legitimately elected government to ransom and make the authorities

concede to all their illegitimate demands (to the extent of manipulating the constitution) will only make the country a laughing stock. Moreover it is also a curse for their economy. Fiji is a relatively well-developed island economy which is dependent mainly on tourism (largest foreign exchange earner), export of sugar (mainly to EU) and the garment trade. But in such small island countries where the economic base is generally small and fragile with heavy dependence on the outside world vulnerability is more and such shock waves can lead to disastrous consequences. In fact Fiji will be unable to withstand the jolts of such upheavals. In order to maintain or enhance economic prosperity political stability is the prerequisite. The country has already lost millions and millions of dollars. Thousands of people have lost their jobs and investors are losing confidence in Fiji. Tourist traffic has already been hit. Moreover, if land leases are not renewed, consequences will simply be dire. Fijians must face the truth before it is too late.

As far as India is concerned, it has genuine interest in the affairs of the Indian origin community in Fiji. It has acted jointly with the international community and in future should pursue active diplomacy on platforms like the Commonwealth, United Nations and the European Union to ensure that democracy returns to the island country and more than that racial discrimination should be stopped from getting legitimised through a constitutional façade. On the other hand the international community must translate its concern over the happenings in Suva into a punitive action. Any manipulation with the constitution must be stopped but only in a manner that would not penalise ethnic Indians. Fiji's leading trade partners have reacted strongly. Limited trade sanctions have been put into effect by Australia, New Zealand, the US, Britain and France. However in the present circumstances, the primary motive should be restoration of a civilian government and later fresh elections may be held under the guidance of the United Nations.

NOTES

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