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# ***Indians and the Struggle for Power in Fiji***

**Amba Pande\***

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## **Introduction**

Migration of people across the globe is an inseparable part of human history. India too has been witnessing massive movement of its people to other parts of the world since ancient times. Today more than 20 million people of Indian origin (PIOs) can be found settled in around 70 countries all over the world. Indian overseas migration can be broadly divided into three phases: (1) Indian migration during ancient times: our historical sources are replete with the accounts of Buddhist bikshus and traders who traveled extensively throughout Asia and Africa (2) Indian migration during colonial period: A systematic method of migration, which incorporated the indentured, *Kangani* and free or independent labour migration, was evolved during the British period through which Indians in great numbers migrated to different colonies, and (3) Indian migration during post-colonial period: Indians migrated to industrially developed countries for better employment opportunities during this period (Jayaram 2004).

The Indian migration to Fiji falls into the second phase of migration that occurred during the colonial period. The Indians went to this pacific island country as indentured labourers to work in sugar plantations. Some of them also went after 1920 as free migrants such as traders, teachers, doctors, etc., but they were comparatively few in number. The decision of an individual or a group of people to migrate to other places is influenced by various factors. These may be broadly characterized as the ‘Push factors’ and the ‘Pull factors’, which may operate in individuality or in

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combination (Jayaram 2004: 24) such as in the case of Post Colonial migrations the ‘Pull Factor’ which might have operated in the form of better employment opportunities must have led people to migrate. But in case of migrations to Fiji the ‘Push Factor’, such as the decline of handicrafts, failure of crops, debts, and pressure from Zamindars and Sahukars or absence of work must have been greater than any ‘Pull’ from Fiji (Saha 1970 ; Gillion 1962).

Situated in the south pacific, Fiji lies on the 180-degree meridian. It comprises of about three hundred islands. The two major islands in the group are known as Viti Levi and Vanua Levu. At the time of arrival of the first European adventurers in the late eighteenth century the Fijians were divided into small chiefdoms. In 1874 Fiji became a British colony through a ‘Deed of Succession’. The first Governor General Sir Arthur Gordan introduced major changes in the social and economic life of Fiji. In order to make Fiji a self-sufficient economy, he persuaded the Australian Sugar Refining company (CSR) to start its operations in Fiji. In the course of time sugar became the backbone of the economy and CSR its largest producer in Fiji. To supply cheap labour to the growing sugar industry the Britishers felt the need to import labour from India under the indentured system by which India was already supplying labour to other British, French and Dutch colonies.

Between 1879 and 1916 some 60,537 Indians arrived in Fiji as indentured labourers. Of these approximately 75 percent boarded their ship in Calcutta (they came mostly from the improvised districts of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) and the rest in Madras (they belonged to migration prone districts of South India such as North Arcot, Chingleput and Madras). These labourers went to Fiji under an agreement or deed, which was signed initially for a period of five years, but they were forced to extend it for another five years. At the end of ten years they were allowed either to return to India or remain in Fiji as free workers. The term agreement in popular parlance came to be known as ‘girmit’ and hence the Indians were addressed as ‘girmityas’.

The majority of these labourers got employed into CSR to work on its sugar plantations. Their life in these plantations was very much different from that it was in India. They were housed in barracks, called ‘lines’ which consisted of two rows of about eight rooms. One room was allotted to three single men or one married couple with their children. There was hardly any privacy since the partition did not reach to the ceiling. Social conditions in these lines were anything but satisfactory. The small proportion of women among the migrants added to the misery, as they became a constant source of conflict, which led to an exceedingly fragile domestic

organization. Another bane of indenture was the ‘task’ system of work. Under this, each day, migrants were set a specific amount of work to perform before nightfall and very often planters tended to over-task the labourers. The penalty for not completing the task was stoppage of daily wage or corporal punishment. In essence the life in these plantations was pitiable and Indians were treated no better than slaves. One can find immense number of writings narrating the harrowing experiences of indenture (Gillion 1962).

The first attack on the indenture system appeared in a book written by a missionary J.W. Burton. He exposed the abuses of the indentured system in his work. On the basis of this Gopal Krishna Gokhle a newly appointed member of the Imperial legislative council in India, took up the matter with the British government. Other prominent people who worked for this cause were Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, Dada Bhai Naoroji, Banarsi Das Chaturvedi and Pandit Totaram Sanadhya (Totaram Sanadhya had gone to Fiji as an indentured labourer. After his return to India he narrated the horrific tales of the indenture Fiji that was published in the form of a book by Banarsi Das Chaturvedi. ‘Fiji mein mere ekkessi warsh’). Public opinion in India too was constantly growing hostile to the indenture system. The conditions on the sugar plantations in Fiji were among the worst in the colonies. The British government, under the public pressure appointed several committees to look into the matter. These committees did nothing to end the indenture system, but did suggest improvement in the working conditions, introduction of education, etc.

Mahatma Gandhi’s battle for the rights of Indians in Natal brought the matter to forefront. On his return to India, Gandhiji took forward the battle. Inspired by the accounts of Totaram Sanadhya, in 1915 he sent Rev Charles Freer Andrews to Fiji, for a firsthand account of the conditions of the indentured labourers. After traveling through the plantations in Fiji, Andrews wrote extensively about the evils of the system and came out with several suggestions, which initiated improvements in the existing conditions in the plantations (Singh 2001). The Indian National congress also started mass agitation against the system of indenture migrations. As a result of all these efforts, further recruitments to the colonies were stopped and by 1920 indenture system finally came to an end.

There were around 60,000 Indians in Fiji when the system ended. And a majority of them decided to stay on. They settled on leased lands and continued to work mainly in the sugar industry as growers and mill workers. Over the years the community diversified and grew. By mid 1940s their population out numbered

the indigenous Fijians giving rise to the fear of the so-called Indian domination (Gillion 1977).

### **Political Awareness Among Indians**

As the Indian population increased and began to settle down in Fiji, its leaders started aspiring for a greater role in the politics of the country. However the birth of Indian politics in Fiji had nothing to do with the government or opposition to it. Rather it was an attempt to seek redress from what was found irksome in the indenture system. Small meetings and Ram Mandilis represented the nature of Indian politics in the early years. These gatherings were held on Saturdays and Sundays where Ramayana was read and communal matters discussed afterwards; newspapers were circulated and collections taken up. In this way Indians maintained contact not only with each other but also with India and events there. However they did not intend to plan uprisings or ferment discontent in the country (Ali 1978: 478-479). But the constitution of 1904 presented a new challenge as it denied Indians the right to vote. Indians were given no representation in the Legislative Council while the European community got six seats and ethnic Fijians indirectly chose two chiefs. Hence there arose the necessity to fight for political rights. Leaders started emerging from within the community who were completely devoted to political causes.

In 1909 Indians in India were given the right to vote for electing their representatives to the Viceroy's Council, thereby giving a boost to the ongoing struggle for representation to Indians in Fiji (Ali 1978: 480). By 1920s organized strikes started taking place against the pitiable working conditions. But slowly the issues of concern became broad based and high profile; voting rights were given to Indians in 1929. After this they started pressing for the use of common roll instead of communal roll and One Man One Vote for the election to legislative assembly. The system of Communal Electorate meant that people were divided into separate electorates on the basis of their ethnic groupings. The reason the Indians were pressing for the common roll was because they wanted equal rights for all people in a multi-racial country like Fiji. The preference for 'One man One Vote' was there because the Indians thought it was the only proper way to identify the majority (Lawson 1991). But these ideas were rejected by most of the Fijians on the ground that it might dilute their political identity.

Political parties were formed in Fiji in 1966. National Federation Party (NFP) emerged as the Indian dominated party taking forward the Indian demands like the 'Common Roll' and 'One Man One Vote'. The formation of Fiji Labour Party (FLP) in 1985 gave further boost to the Indian political aspirations in Fiji. The party emerged

out of the largest trade union and claimed to be the first real multiracial party. Thus the political struggle of Indo Fijians crossed the narrow boundary of race and became broad based.

At the General Elections in April 1987 a coalition of FLP and NFP established victory over the long ruling Alliance Party. Dr. Bavadra was sworn in as the Prime Minister of Fiji. It was the first time in the Fijian history that Indians were given equal role in the governance of the country. However, showing little regard for the democratic principles the government was overthrown by a coup led by Lt. Col. Sitiveni Rabuka. At first glance the coup appeared to be the racist reaction by the ethnic Fijians but an in-depth analysis shows that the issues involved were much more complex thus it would be interesting to glance at the racial divide in Fiji and also how the race factor has been used in the struggle for power in Fiji.

### **The Racial Divide and Struggle for Power**

In Fiji the history of racial divide can be traced back to the colonial period. The British evolved separate local administrations for Indians and ethnic Fijians. They kept the two ethnic groups divided and protected the feudal elements of the society to safeguard the economic and political interests of the commercial lobby. They facilitated their rule through accommodating, and partly creating, a Fijian chiefly elite. These policies, almost identical to those followed in Malaya, involved a tacit alliance with the 'traditional' rulers and the indigenous population was kept largely out of the modern economy. In the name of preserving the Fijian way of community life the British had banned the Fijian labour mobility and had made ethnic Fijians to live separately from the indo-Fijians, which made indigenous Fijians to get confined to their traditional occupations in their villages. In the words of Stephanie Regan, an eminent scholar on Fiji, '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 or in a relative isolation from the mainstream of colonial politics. Indeed, it can be argued that these efforts 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' (Hegan 1987: 3).

Following the policy of 'divide and rule', Britishers maintained and inspired the belief that the Indians who had outnumbered all others in the population and were economically better off, if given equal political rights, would take over the country which legitimately belonged to the Fijians (Chauhan 1991: 3). Indians on the other hand prospered over the years and began playing dominant role in trade and

commerce. As they were better educated they took up white collared jobs and became lawyers, doctors etc. Their century old presence in the island country was a success story, and remained the major source of resentment against them.

'The fear of Indian domination and the supremacy of Fijian interests got reflected in the 1970 constitution also. It incorporated certain clauses regarding the inalienable rights of the Fijians towards their land, customs and way of life. A unique voting system was evolved to protect the political power ensured to the Fijians. The system of communal electoral rolls, introduced before independence, continued. Thus in the Fijian parliament the lower house of 52 members was communally divided into 12 Fijian MPs and 12 Indian MPs to be elected on the communal voters roll. The 10 other MPs from each community were elected on the national roll by their respective communities as well as by other communities. The remaining 8 MPs were elected on general voters roll representing communities such as the Europeans and the Chinese. Thus each voter had a total of four votes, one in the communal electorate and three (one for each grouping) in the national electorate. Moreover the special representation given to the council of chiefs was of most crucial significance in establishing the supremacy of Fijian interests. The council of chiefs had 8 nominated members in the upper house called the Senate. Any three of these nominees had effective veto over any legislative attempt to interfere with core Fijian interests such as land, customs and way of life.'

The constitution of 1990 that came into effect after 1987 coup was even more discriminatory. It eliminated cross-ethnic voting so voting, was to be done only on communal lines. The House of Representatives consisted of 70 members. Thirty-seven were to be elected by Fijians, 27 by Indians. The Senate was enlarged to 34 seats out of which twenty-four seats were given to Fijians. Thus one can see that even most generous interpretations could not deny the fact that it was discriminatory and non-democratic. It relegated the Indians to a position from where they could have never become politically powerful (Kaul 1993: 40).

Even the 1997 constitution, that Rabuka had to adopt due political difficulties and down turn of country's economy, and which was an amalgam of ideas which brought diverse people together, in an interestingly just manner, (Dhawan 2000) also protected the Fijian interests.

The issue of land was another factor, which was used as a tool against the Indians. In fact the root of the land politics in Fiji goes back to pre-independence period. It was one of the most contentious issues in the Fijian-Indian relations. The ethnic Fijians owned more than 83 percent of the land but as main commercial

cultivators of sugarcane, Indo Fijians held most of it as tenant farmers. 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 majority of the Fijians. In fact the most astonishing factor is that if one travels across Fiji one can see stretches of land lying unutilized, enough for Fijians and Indo Fijians to depend on, but wherever and whenever needed the issue of land was made an instrument to mobilize the Fijians against the Indians and the "bogey of Indian land grab" was used by the ruling elite to maintain Fijian support base (Hegan 1987: 4).

However, presenting too rigid a picture of this racial divide would do an injustice to the analysis of the Fijian society. All along the years, the character of Fijian society was constantly undergoing a change. Urbanization, growth of tourism, higher education, growth of technology, were affecting the traditional social structure and weakening the traditional hold of the feudal system. Even before independence Fijian and Indian communities were crosscutting political associations. Some Fijian leaders joined hands with Indian political parties while wealthy Indians and members of the Muslim League joined hands with the ruling elite. (La1 1989: 100) When political parties were formed in Fiji, they were formed along racial lines. But class and economic undercurrents were not totally absent. NFP had a strong populist orientation representing the interests of peasants, producers, and workers in agricultural and industrial. The formation of FLP in 1985 gave a new boost to socio economic dimension of political parties. FLP was the First Real Multiracial Party with its support base in the cross section of the society consisting mainly of three classes (1) Indians (2) Urban Fijians and (3) Western Fijians.

But the Fijian leaders failed to understand the changing realities of the society. The Fijian chiefly elite, addicted to power since the colonial period and which continued through the Alliance rule from 1972 to 1986, were convinced of their fundamental right to govern and unwilling to share power with others (Lal 1992). Fiji's diversity and the different ways of living of the two major communities required that statesmen should have worked towards preventing ethnic differences from being politicized (Pradhan 2000: 93) but unfortunately the racial issue was used to exacerbate the already existing problem by the vested interests to fulfill their own objectives. The issue was politicized and in almost every election the race card was played to further the political goals. During both the coups i.e. in 1987 and 2000, before which Indian dominated parties had come to power, the issue of land and Indian domination were raised by the ultra nationalist called 'Taukei' to mobilize the ethnic Fijians against the government and to install a Fijian elite led regime, which

espoused the traditional order aiming to preserve its own privileged position in both Fijian society and modern economy and in the process making the Indians convenient scape goats.

### **India and Fiji**

As far as India is concerned, it has genuine interest in the affairs of people of Indian origin in Fiji. India's feelings are very well reflected in the words of the late Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi who during her visit to Fiji, in 1981, stated, 'I feel somewhat like a mother concerned about the welfare of a married daughter who has set up her home far away' (Thakur 1985).

'Before independence India worked extensively under Indian National Congress for the upliftment of indentured labourers and later for the abolition of the system and took up the issue with the British government. After independence however Indian interest in the subject was transformed from attacking British policy into an issue in India's international relations. Jawaharlal Nehru was genuinely concerned for the welfare of Overseas Indians but at the same time did not want to infringe upon the sensitivities and sovereignties of other countries. He emphasized very clearly that India's concern with overseas Indians, who are not Indian citizens are purely sentimental-not political. If Indians experienced legal or constitutional difficulties, it is not India's problem but since India is interested in their welfare it would make friendly efforts to see that they could live with self-respect and decency (Nehru-1 1961) and that the Government would endeavor to see that their rights and opportunities were equal to those of all other citizens' (Nehru-2 1961).

The people of Indian origin in Fiji, in the initial years of Fiji's independence did not face any serious challenge as Fiji presented a picture of racial harmony and peaceful coexistence despite being a multi ethnic society until the 1987 coup. Hence there was no need for the Indian government to be much concerned about the Fijian affairs. However the Indian concentration in Fiji resulted in an Indian diplomatic presence almost immediately after India's independence.

India's concerns were aroused after 1987 coup, which resulted in serious deterioration in race relations in Fiji. But New Delhi's reaction to the developments of 1987 and 2000 has been cautious and restrained and rightly so, as India's position is precarious with regard to the sensitivities of the race relations in Fiji. An overreaction by India might have strengthened the hands of chauvinistic elements in the Fijian society. India is already seen with much suspicion by the Fijian leadership and has been charged several times for interfering in Fiji's internal matters. In 1982 Ratu Mara openly made allegations against India and Soviet Union for conspiring to

oust him (*The Bulletin* 1982). A formal complaint was lodged by Fiji against the Indian High Commissioner. Thus India has to react cautiously keeping in view the larger interest of the PIOs in Fiji.

After the 1987 coup India was successful in getting Fiji expelled from the Commonwealth. After the promulgation of the 1990 constitution India brought the matter of institutionalization of racial discrimination to the notice of the UN General Assembly. After the May 2000 coup, however, there were sharp differences within the government on how India should deal with the Fiji crises. A section wanted to adopt a proactive approach by imposing economic sanctions and recalling the Indian High Commissioner from Suva. On the other hand those who adopted the moderate approach wanted to apply indirect pressure on Fiji through countries like Australia and New Zealand that possessed the necessary leverage to influence its action. The latter seemed to have prevailed as India patched up its relations with Australia, strained after the nuclear test by India in 1998. India took up the issue with Australia and tried to exert pressure on the undemocratic and racial forces in Fiji. Australia is the most important player in the region and also Fiji's largest economic partner, which gives it a political and economic edge to influence the conduct of Fiji's leaders (Chari 2000).

But overall one can say that India has time and again failed to wield effective pressure on Fiji, as can be seen during the incidents of 1987 and 2000 or during the' promulgation of 1990 Constitution, when she failed to come out with any concrete strategy to exert cogent pressure. This has been largely due to the lack of a definite, conceptualized policy towards the island country. Most of the times we have only reacted to different situations as and when they arose. The overall inert attitude is also reflected by India's share in Fiji's trade, which is minuscule and by the absence of any economic aid by India to Fiji.

It is indeed true that not only Fiji but also South Pacific as a whole is of little strategic importance to India. But today the Indian Diaspora has economically, politically and socially become extremely important for India. They are the political, cultural and social ambassadors of India to different countries. Wooing the Diaspora is a growing trend around the world. In countries like China the major share of its foreign direct investment comes from its Diaspora [approx- 65 to 80 per cent]. In India too plans are afoot to attract investment by the Diaspora. India now desires to explore and tap the potential of its Diaspora. But along with all this India will also have to take the responsibility towards its Diaspora. It will have to protect their interest and confront the problems faced by them.

The Indian government should not be complacent with the fact that democracy has started functioning in Fiji. PIOs in Fiji today, are confronted with the problem of their existence. Due to the uncertainties of the future in Fiji they are migrating to different countries, there is no system of secure land leases and many of the Indo Fijians are getting displaced. To be able to play any role in this scenario the Indian government should come out with a definite policy towards Fiji. It should stop looking at the matter from a purely racial point of view and endeavor to improve its overall relations with Fiji. This can be achieved through improving trade relations communication links, and cultural diplomacy, frequent high level visits, etc. India can also play an important role in the field of technology transfers and joint ventures, particularly of small-scale industries, which are suited for the small and remote markets like Fiji. It is only through an overall engagement with the country that India will be able to play an effective role in the Fijian ethnic crises and ensure the protection of Indo Fijian interest.

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