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Dialogue: Writers Forum

From Indian Coolies to Fijians: Culture and Identity Change among Indo-Fijians

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Abstract

Over the last 138 years both the original indentured labourers (girmitiyas) and 4-5 generations of their descendants have been subjected to enormous social, economic, and political changes which have wrought significant transformation in their cultures and identities. This paper reflects on the consequences of the Indenture Labour System, the Colonial Sugar Refinery Company policies regarding tenant and contract farmers, colonial and post-colonial ethnic policies, land tenure system, intra and inter-ethnic relations, and the quest for education on Indo-Fijian culture and identity formation. It argues that over time the culturally diverse descendants of girmitiyas, and free migrants acquired initially a common Fiji 'Indian identity' with a sense of 'Pacific islandness' which is being reinforced in the current period by the policy of the state to forge a common Fijian identity among its multi-ethnic citizenry.

Introduction

> *Curiously, it is in India that I discover the depth of my Fijian roots, the influence of an oceanic culture on my being: a deep commitment to egalitarianism, a certain impatience with protocol and ritual, a zest for living here and now, humility and tolerance, and compassionate for fellow human beings as kindred travellers in the same canoe of life* (Brij V. Lal, 2000: 32-33).

> *The one impression I have living in Canberra the past quarter century amongst Indians is that Indo-Fijians are culturally and socially distinct from those from the mainland. We are more laid-back, trusting, and have adopted and adapted to island culture without realizing this. Do you know that LA and Sydney have kava bars like those in Suva market serving Indo-Fijians only? The melding of Indo-Fijians into Pacific Islanders I think has been necessary given the forces at play, successful on many counts, and gives us all a distinct identity.* Satish Chand (1February 2017, personal communication)

Over the last 138 years immense changes have occurred in the cultures and identities of both the original indenture migrants (girmitiyas) and their 3-5 generations of descendants. In 1932, the Secretary of Indian Affairs in Fiji, JR Pearson wrote, 'It is of great importance that the local Indians should learn that they are "Fijians" first and only incidentally Indians by origin and should co-operate with other sections and the administration in working out their common destiny' (Lal, 1998: 292). He went on to state that, 'This is the more important because they are undoubtedly developing individual characteristics of their own, and Indian analogies are apt to be misleading'. The accommodation of girmitiyas and Fiji born Indians in colonial society, and even in post-independence society was tortuous even as their cultures changed. It was to take another 80 years before the term 'Fijian' for all citizens of Fiji irrespective of ethnicity or 'race' was to become a reality. It is worthy of note that the weekly National Federation Party bulletin, *Pacific Review's* editor, Ratu Julian Toganivalu advocated 'Fijian' as a common name for all citizens of the country, and 'Taukei' for the autochthonous inhabitants.

With the passage of time from generally being a land-bound peasantry which had not seen the sea until they boarded the Fiji-bound ship in Calcutta and Madras, they became islanders in a multi-ethnic archipelagic colony. The changes wrought to their cultures and identities were rapid, and accompanied the political changes that occurred during this time. This period can be divided into early colonial, colonial, post-independence, and post-2006 coup periods. This paper examines each of these periods, highlighting changes as seen by various scholars of girmit, the girmitiyas and their Fiji-born descendants. It is based on reflections derived from the woks of Ahmed Ali, Ken Gillion, Brij Lal, Shiu Prasad, Subramani, Wadan Narsey, Satish Chand, Vijay Mishra, Sudesh Mishra, Margaret Mishra, Mohit Prasad among others, and on an e-mail survey conducted among some Indo-Fijian intellectuals regarding Fiji Indian culture and identity in 2005. It focuses on ethnicity, 'racial identity', and na-

tional identity, and accepts that people have multiple identities of which the particular identity or set of identities used is situational.

Early Colonial Era: Loss of Caste, Jahajibhais, and Girmit, the Great Leveller

Records show that 60,965 indentured labourers were shipped to Fiji between 1879 and 1916. Forty-five thousand came from North India (via Calcutta) and fifteen thousand from South India (via Madras) (Lal, 1998, 1). A clear majority were below 30 years of age. These peasants from United Provinces, Oudh, Bihar Central Provinces, Madras, Arcot, Tanjore, Krishna, Godavari, Vizakhapatnam, Coimbatore and Malabar with smaller numbers from 'Tibet..Ladakh..Peshawar and Kabul' (Lal, 2000: 103) were defined by their age, caste, village, district, province, language, religion and gender. The majority came from lower to middle order agricultural castes and a small minority claimed higher caste status. More than 85 percent of the emigrants were Hindus; Muslim comprised around 8 per cent, and the remainder were Christians or professed other religions. There were mostly illiterate.

Their ties with India abruptly ceased once the ship departed Calcutta or Madras. They did not have a common identity. This was to emerge through their experience of recruitment, transportation, quarantine, and work as plantation labourers or 'Indian coolies', and in their struggle against racism of the colonial order. Twelve years after the end of all indenture contracts, Pearson noted, 'The Indian community must be looked on at present as largely composed of samples from many different strata of widely separated parts of India and still in process of cohering together as a distinct unit in the body politic' (Lal, 1998: 315).

Caste, which defined their status in society and life work in India, was subjected to assault again and again in the various stages of the indenture process. With little regard to caste rules, the labourers were compelled to live and eat together at the holding depots in Calcutta and Madras. In the sailing ships for over 3 months, and in the steam ships for over a month, girmitiyas lived in close proximity, had commensal relations, and took turns doing chores as 'topas'. The last involved doing 'dirty polluting' work such as sweeping, cleaning lavatories, disposing excreta, and similar works which violated upper caste rules, and sensibilities (Sanadhya, 1973).

Having crossed the 'kala pani', the immigrants were held in quarantine on Nukulau island for several weeks where much of the ship-board routine was repeated. By this stage a strong sense of being 'jahajis' or

ship-board brotherhood/sisterhood had emerged from the trials and tribulations of the long and arduous journey. The jahajibhai/bhaini identity would remain with the girmitiyas for the rest of their lives. The jahajis were divided and allocated to plantations all over Fiji. Like Pacific Island labourers (mainly from Melanesia) before them, and who worked in some plantations alongside them, they were treated primarily as units of labour. Caste related rules were yet again ignored in housing, plantation work, and roles relating to plantation hierarchy. Girmit was a greater lever that did a massive demolition job on the caste system so that the caste hierarchies characteristic of India was not reproduced in Fiji.

'**Girmit,** as the agreement to work for five years, at 1/-per day for 5 1/2 days per week came to be called, proved a harrowing experience for most. Those serving **girmit** referred to it as **narak** (hell) and described their abode, the 'coolie lines' (barracks of sixteen rooms), in tow rows of eight, each room measuring 10 feet by 7 feet (after 1908, 12 feet by 10 feet), housing three single men or a married couple (with no more than two children) as **a kasbighar** (brothel)' (Ali in (Ministry of Information, 1979: 11 bold is original).

Ahmed Ali noted that most girmityas 'survived this trauma, learning in the crucible of girmit that industry and individualism were prerequisites for success in the new world they had journeyed to explore and make their own' (1979:11). In the 5-10 years as girmitiyas, a number of significant changes regarding cultures and identities emerged.

First, girmitiyas became conscious of their common treatment as 'Indian coolies' subjected to compulsory and oppressive labour conditions backed by penal sanctions. They could be beaten-up by the overseer and or sirdar if they did not work as directed. They became intensely aware of their sense of having travelled a very long way together from *Bharat*, their 'mother-land' to Fiji *tapu*. Second, over-time a common lingua-franca, 'plantation-language' or 'Fiji Baat' evolved to connect not only those who had their origins in North India but also, the Dravidian language speakers of the South. Third, during girmit, religious divisions were blurred; it was common for girmitiyas to celebrate religious festivals connected to Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Inter-marriages occurred across religious lines.

Women acquired status as independent workers and earners. Their smaller number made them in great demand, but also the subject of efforts by men to dominate and control them. They were victims of sexual violence as well as domestic violence. During indenture and well into the 1950s, girls were betrothed, and married at an early age which meant they were likely to have been relatively uneducated and unemployed –

confined to domestic work and work in the farms. However, widows acquired high status in post-girmit society.

The 'Indian Problem' in Fiji and the Emergence of Common 'Indian' Identity

The British followed the well-established imperial precept of 'divide and rule' defining its colonial subjects according to 'race' and subjecting them to discriminatory treatment and segregation. The racial division of labour, limited educational opportunities, 'glass ceilings' based on colour lines, race-based unequal political representation, separate education, segregated housing, segregated social clubs and sports, built and reinforced an Indian identity. The girmitiyas and their Fiji-born off-springs were treated as the colonial 'other' by whites, and their indigenous Fijian chiefly allies. Over time the sense of being oppressed as a racial group, as 'Indians' emerged in their struggle for social justice and political rights.

The Fiji colonial state designated all those who had come from the subcontinent as belonging to the 'Indian race' even though the girmitiyas were physically different in terms of built, skin colour and hair-type, and spoke a variety of languages. These included Bojpuri, Hindi, Nepali, Punjabi, Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam, Kanada, and Urdu. To these was added after 1920, Gujarati, the language of free migrants who arrived from Gujarat. Generally, these languages were mutually unintelligible, and were the bases for separate ethnicities.

From 1884 onwards the 'khula' or 'free' girmitiyas who had completed their 5 years (or more if their contracts were extended under the punitive labour laws) sought land to farm. As their numbers increased, the demand for agricultural leaseholds expanded. The Fiji Times of 10 July, 1907 summarised the Agent-General of Immigration Annual Report stating that, 'Of the total Indian population over 9,000 are working out their indentures; while 19,000 other time expired immigrants are carving out their fortunes in the Colony' (Ministry of Information, 1979: 21). Following some experiments with small tenant farmers, from the 1920s onwards, CSR rapidly subdivided its large sugar estates into on an average 10 acre allotments which it leased to former girmitiyas and their descendants. Depending on availability of land – freehold, state-owned, and customarily owned – the girmitiyas settled predominantly in the sugar–growing areas. Unlike the pattern of clustered village settlements in India, scattered communities of 'joint-family' households comprising a married couple with their married and unmarried children evolved in these areas. The farms were too small to sustain more than one family, and usually it was

the eldest Fiji-born son who inherited the parent's house and farm (Lal, 2000: xiii). Daughters were often married off early, and younger sons sought agricultural leasehold elsewhere, or off-farm employment. Peasant or small holder 'commercial farming' became a hall mark of the identity of the girmitiyas and their descendants (Mayer; 1963, 1973).

In the post-girmit era 'Indian coolie' settlements emerged in the outskirts of sugar-mill towns and other urban centres. As in rural localities, temples, mosques, and gurdwaras became a feature of the landscape, as did schools that carried the insignia of 'Indian', or a religious-cultural identity such as 'Muslim', Sanatan, Arya, or Sangam. Religious beliefs, festivals and rituals survived the girmit era and beyond.

Girmitiyas and their descendants realized fairly early that education was pivotal in gaining *izzat* (self-respect) and status in the colonial order. Being landless, they were compelled to look for off-farm livelihoods and employment. Hawking and small shops proliferated with a mixture of success and failure. With the arrival of motor vehicles, they took up taxi and bus businesses, and associated mechanical work with some enthusiasm. Religious and cultural groups such as the Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha, Arya Samaj, Then India Ikya Sangam, Fiji Muslim League, and Gujarat Education Society were organized; these established educational institutions to complement schools run by Christian missions which catered for the Fiji-born children of girmitiyas. In time much to the dismay of CSR and some colonial officials, 'a babu class' emerged among the now increasingly racially conscious 'Indians'. By the 1940s and 1950s, a small but articulate class of trade unionists, teachers and lawyers had emerged to take up leadership on 'Indian rights' in the colony.

During the period 1920-1969, girmitiyas and their descendants engaged in continued struggles against the colonial administration and the Colonial Sugar Refinery Company (CSR) on matters of 'izzat' (dignity and honour), and earnings as contract and tenant farmers, sugar mill workers, municipal council workers, oil and general workers; and in political representation. Their struggle for equality of treatment was deemed to be a challenge to European dominance (Gillion, 1977). This in essence was the 'Indian problem' in Fiji. As labourer class discontent overlapped with ethnicity, genuine economic grievances were interpreted as being politically motivated (Ali, 1980; Sutherland, 1992). Several bitter struggles over fair returns to farmers, mill workers, municipal workers, and on the question of political representation occurred in the 1920s, 1940s and in the 1960s. Police and soldiers were used to quell strike action and associated civil unrest and damage to property in a number of these incidents. In 1959, the long dreaded united action of coloured workers against

the 'white establishment' came to pass in the capital city, Suva. Industrial action against multinational oil companies culminated with damages to white-owned businesses, as Indian and Fijian workers and their supporters rioted after police fired tear gas on a peaceful crowd. The colonial government imposed a week long curfew to re-establish order.

Politics of Race and Reinforcement of 'Indian' Identity Formation

'Race' was the central pillar and organizational principle of colonial society. Political representation was based on 'race'. The doctrine of paramountcy of Fijian interests was used as a cover to promote and perpetuate European privilege. Europeans obtained franchise in 1904. In 1912 Executive Council membership, and property and literacy qualifications ensured their dominance of the Suva municipality. 'Indians' received limited franchise in 1929, with 3 representatives in the Legislative Council. Indigenous Fijians were to have 3 representatives chosen by the Governor. The 'Indian' political leaders boycotted the legislature following the defeat of the motion that sought equal political rights, and common roll. From 1937 to 1963, Europeans and Indians elected 3 representatives each on a communal basis, and the Governor nominated 2 representatives from each of the two 'races'. The Fijians had representation through the Council of Chiefs which submitted a list of names to the Governor who then chose 5 representatives for them. In 1963, elected representatives were increased to 4 for each of the 3 'racial' groups, on a communal franchise. The Governor continued to nominate 2 representatives from each of the 3 groups. Legislative Council members chose 2 representatives from their own 'races' for membership of the Executive Council.

The 1965 constitution continued the racial basis of political representation:

> For Fijians, numbering 228,000, there were 14 seats including two representatives to be chosen by the Council of Chiefs. For 256,000 Indians or nearly 50 per cent of the population there were 12 seats. For Europeans, who now had with them the Chinese as well as part-Europeans, and all collectively designated General Electors, totalling 28,000 or 7 per cent of the colony's people, there were 10 seats or 28 per cent of the elected 36 seats in the new Council (Ali, 1980: 152-153).

The racial categorization of the colonial state was intensified by communal politics with Fiji Indians continuing to demand common roll ('one man, one vote'), and General Electors and indigenous Fijians clinging on to communal representation. The latter assured them of electoral victories and control over state power offsetting increasing numbers of Fiji born Indians. Fiji's independence constitution negotiated in London among the 'European', 'Fijian' and 'Indian' leaders replicated communal representation, and the cross-voting system for a limited number of seats, first introduced in the 1965 electoral arrangements.

Throughout the post-indenture colonial period, the three racial groupings of Fiji's people were emphasized with the systems of nominating and electing leaders based on 'race'. In national political processes, political leaders were consumed by 'racial issues' and continuously stressed the importance of 'racial unity'. It is unsurprising therefore that the diverse ethnicities of the girmitiyas and their descendants was to merge into the 'Indian' racial identity.

Religious divisions and identities harden among girmitiyas and their descendants after indenture ended, as religious denominations imported missionaries from India to re-proselytize the girmitiyas. Some tensions and conflicts took place between orthodox and reformist denominations, and from the 1930s onwards Hindu-Muslim divisions became apparent. The colonial government fostered the division by nominating Muslim representatives in the legislature, and in time, some Muslim leaders demanded separate electoral representation. The partition of India affected Hindu- Muslim relations in Fiji.

Differences Between India-born and Fiji-born

It is noteworthy that inter-generational differences between the girmitiyas and their Fiji-born offspring occurred early. Ken Gillion (1962, 1977) and Brij Lal (2004) have noted that the former were concerned about their children's future as they were not as hard working and thrifty as their parents. And they had 'easy going ways'. Differences between them could also be observed in the language used, and the clothes they wore (Lal, 2000: 26). The Fiji-born began exhibiting island ways adding to the anxiety of the girmitiyas.

The division between India-born and Fiji-born took a stark turn in the politics of colonial society beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century with the Governor appointing a Fiji born man over an India-born lawyer. In electoral politics Fiji-born / India-born division was used by candidates born in the colony to mobilise support for themselves. On some occasions Fiji-born opinion leaders demanded the repatriation of the India-born to the sub-continent! The Gujarati business community

was subjected to much criticism from time to time together with demands for repatriation (Lal, 1997).

Language Loss

Over the 4-5 generations there has been considerable language loss generally, and especially among descendants of girmitiyas of small ethnic groups such as speakers of Dravidian languages. There are pockets of Tamil and Telegu speakers who are mainly second generation, while the younger generations do not speak these languages. Malayalam and Kannada have long gone. Even the dominant North Indian Bojpuri has undergone significant change so much so that 'Fiji Baat' is quite distinct from it.

Indian Cinema

Hindi movies have been an affordable source of entertainment especially for the Fiji born. Movies, songs, actors and actresses became topics of conversation, and often catchy songs were learnt and sung by them. Hindu religious movies were viewed intently, and provided insights into religious scriptures for the less knowledgeable. Historical movies about the lives, heroics and romance of early rulers - emperors, prince and princes - were also in demand and often shown repeatedly because of 'public demand'. The cultural impact of Bollywood needs detailed research but suffice it to say that Hindi movie songs, sartorial preferences of movie stars, hair styles have all influenced the Fiji born. In fact it has been a practice for some time now that new born babies in a good number of families have names after film stars.

The Post-Independence Period: Ethnic Capture of the State, and on being a 'Fiji Indian' or 'Indo-Fijian'

The 1970 independence constitution allocated 22 seats each to Fijians and Indians (12 communal and 10 cross-voting), and 8 seats to General Electors (3 communal and 5 cross-voting). In the cross-voting seats the candidate was from a particular 'race' but the voters were of all ethnicities, in contrast to communal seats where both the candidate for the parliament and the voters were of a particular race. The upper house or Senate comprised entirely of nominated members who generally represented the designated 'races', and chiefs of Fiji. The Alliance Party based on the indigenous Fijian Association, and supported by European and Indo-Fijian business interests, was to hold power until 1987. At the political level, it continued the divide and rule policy of the colonial era. Government ministers, and senior public servants were predominantly indigenous Fijians.

By independence a distinct 'Fiji Indian' or 'Indo-Fijian' identity had emerged. The term *Indo-Fijian* was first used by Adrian Mayer (1963) to distinguish the Fiji-born from the India-born girmitiyas. Surviving girmitiyas were given Fiji citizens. Both Fiji-born and India-born remained in the post-colonial state's racial classification of 'Indian'. In all official forms relating to administrative and banking services, it was mandatory to fill 'if Indian, father's name'. This was simply a continuation of colonial practice. For political purposes there were 4 'races', Fijians, Indians, General Electors and Rotumans. For other purposes, 'Melanesian Fijians', Pacific Islanders (Samoans, Tongans, Banabans), Europeans, Part-Europeans, Chinese, and a residual category of others, were designated. Fiji nationals were 'Fiji citizens', without a common national name. For the Alliance government, 'race was a fact of life'.

Inter-ethnic relations deteriorated over time. In his article, '*Na Kai India ni Viti*', in the centenary commemoration booklet, Ropate Qalo recorded the strong negative stereo-types held by Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians about each, and highlighted the need for greater sensitivity to 'each other's ways', likes and fears which 'can help build a nation with a genuine interplay of diversity' (quoted in Ministry of Information, 1979: 61-3). The defeat of the conservative Alliance Party in the April, 1987 by a coalition of the National Federation Party (supported largely by Indo-Fijians), and the newly formed multi-ethnic Fiji Labour Party, was followed by a military coup by the predominantly ethnic Fijian army. When negotiations towards a resolution of the political impasse sidelined the coup leader, another coup in September of 1987 brought into power hard-lined ethno-nationalists of the Taukei Movement who strongly asserted indigenous Fijian paramountcy, and 'Fiji for Fijians'.

These coups began the exodus of Indo-Fijian professionals and trades people and their families to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. Each year since then more than 5,000 Fiji citizens have emigrated. In 2000, the outflow increased with the putsch and ethnic Fijian attacks on Indo-Fijians in Suva, and in the rural south eastern Viti Levu hinterland. This followed by the military coup of that year. The Fiji Labour Party government led by an Indo-Fijian prime minister for the very first time was held hostage for 56 days, and not allowed to return to continue its term of office. Instead, an almost exclusively indigenous Fijian government comprising an assortment of people led by an ethnic Fijian banker was appointed by the military to rule the country. The failure

of this group to follow the directives of the military strong man, and a mutiny in the military barracks, antagonized the military commander. After more than 6 years of rule the SDL government was overthrown by Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama in December, 2006 (Robertson and Sutherland, 2000; Naidu 2007; Frankel and Firth, 2007).

Unlike previous coups where the military had acted on the behest of electorally defeated politicians and/or on the pretext of the paramountcy of indigenous rights, the 2006 coup, it was maintained was to 'clean up' corruption in government, and against the special treatment of any one 'race'. Multi-racialism, equality of citizenships, and merit based system of recruitment in the civil service became the rhetoric of the post-coup leaders. The 2013 Republic of Fiji Constitution proclaimed by the military-backed government has designated all citizens of the country as 'Fijians', and has a novel electoral system that no longer has communal seats or locality based constituencies. The proportional open list electoral system has a single national constituency. In the 2014 general election, the first parliamentary election after 7 years of military backed government, the Bainimarama-led Fiji First Party won a resounding majority of seats in the 50 member parliament.[1] His government has allowed Fiji citizens to have multiple citizenship, and for returning former citizens to either apply for permanent residential status or citizenship.

It is remarkable that after 80 years since Pearson's call for girmitiyas and their Fiji-born offspring to be 'Fijians' that the term has finally been accepted by state-power holders for all citizens of the country irrespective of ethnicity.

Implications of the Use of 'Fijian' for all Citizens

Although when Indo-Fijians and citizens of other ethnicities including especially i'Taukei, are in another country, they are generally regarded as 'Fijians' whereas until the adoption of this common name, the tendency of non-indigenous ethnicities was to identify themselves with their 'race' or ethnicity rather than as citizens of Fiji (1970 Constitution) or Fiji Islanders (1997 Constitution). The later term did not gain popularity at all. When Indo-Fijians went to India to study in universities there, they were very surprised that the locals referred to them as 'Fijian', as all along in Fiji, they were called 'Indians'.

There are several implications of the use of 'Fijian' for all citizens. These include a stronger sense of common national identity, national

[1] See the special election issue of Journal of Pacific Studies (2015) for details on this.

unity, and shared destiny. It also better reflects the long process of acculturation that has taken place over 4-5 generations. Many Indo-Fijians speak Bauan-Fijian, and some are fluent in the language and regional indigenous Fijian dialects, especially in those localities where i'Taukei predominate. Likewise in provinces where Indo-Fijians are the larger population, a good proportion of i'Taukei speak Fiji Baat fluently as well as enjoy Hindi cinema, and television soap opera.

Kava (piper methysticum) is the national beverage consumed by men (but also some women) of all ethnicities. Used earlier on solemn indigenous Fijian rituals, *yaqona*, as it is called locally, has become the social lubricant indulged by men in small and large groups (for instance during funeral wakes) throughout the archipelago. It connects the sugar growing areas in the north and west to kava growing regions in central and eastern parts of the country. The daily gathering for kava consumption has led to an increase in '*nagonchis*' or kava addicts. Indo-Fijians have by and large accepted i'Taukei beliefs and rituals associated with the older traditional religious system. There is an acceptance of a variety of 'spirits', the use of magic, and sacred persons and places. Some pay homage to the shark god, *Dakuwaqa* by pouring the first bowl of yaqona as appeasement to this god.

Curries, especially chicken curry, have become integral to the national diet. Fiji cuisine is generally spicy compared to the other island countries in Oceania. Indigenous Fijian '*lovo*' (food cooked in an earth oven) is widely popular among all ethnicities including Indo-Fijians. Interestingly, Indo-Fijians in the diaspora also do *lovos* on special occasions.

Sports and social clubs (including night clubs) have brought Fiji's people closer together in their love for sports, music and dancing. In sports, rugby, especially the international rugby sevens tournament games, capture the attention of Fiji fans. Fiji sevens teams have played extremely well over the years, and are a source of pride for all Fijians. Soccer is played by most young men, and some young women of all ethnicities. Many districts, and the national side soccer team, have a preponderance of i'Taukei players although the spectators, administrators and referees are predominantly Indo-Fijian.

Generally, with housing, schools and places of work becoming desegregated from the 1960s onwards, there has been increasing interactions among Fiji's diverse people. Writing about how there was much greater inter-action among ethnic Fijians and Indo-Fijians in towns and cities, Kapferer observed: 'But in urban areas both Indians and Fijians perform roles in systems of social relations which are more usually asso-

ciated with modern industrial societies. Neighbourhood ties, common income, employment in the same secondary industry and membership of the same trade unions, may cut across ethnic barriers' (1962, 42).

Fiji's Indo-Fijian millennials have adopted indigenous Fijian attire; boys and men are comfortable in *sulu-vakataga*, the formal 'kilt-like' skirt while some Indo-Fijian women have taken to wearing *sulu-chamba*, the elegant formalwear of i'Taukei women. During Hindu and Muslim religious festivals it has become the norm for people of all ethnicities to dress up in Indian clothes and fineries. These events are generally shared across ethnicities.

Friendships, cohabitation, and inter-marriages have increased since Mayer's (1963) observation that at a time of living largely separate lives, there were some 150 children of mixed heritage born to Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian parents. Inter-ethnic relations have many dimensions at personal and inter-group levels. Issues relating to land and other natural resources, scholarships, employment, discrimination, and social inequality will continue to affect these relationships.

Indo-Fijian Diaspora

Emigration of the Fiji-born has been on-going since the 1960s with numbers gradually increasing up to the early 1980s. Since the coups of 1987, and subsequent political instability and military coups, the annual rate of migration has doubled to over 5,000. Indo-Fijians have constituted over 80 percent of those leaving Fiji to settle in Pacific Rim countries. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there would be as many Indo-Fijians abroad as they are in Fiji. These migrant Indo-Fijians identify themselves as being Fiji-born Indians, in contrast to those who have emigrated from India. In many homes, Fijian memorabilia such as tapa designed table clothes and place mats, the Fiji flag, photos and paintings of Fiji people and scenes, *tanoa* and coconut shell kava bowls, as well as other indigenous Fijian artefacts are proudly displayed.

In cities such as Auckland, Sydney, Vancouver, and Modesto there are gathering places, such as barber shops and 'Fiji-shops'. The back spaces of the 'Fiji shops' are popular for men from Fiji to gather for kava, mutual company and reminiscence about their homeland and discussions about topical Fiji current affairs. With social media and affordable airfares, the virtual and real interactions have intensified between those abroad and those at home in Fiji. Business networks have also been established and strengthened between them. Some of those who have accumu-

lated wealth overseas, have been attracted by Fiji's investment and citizenship/permanent residence for return migrant policies.

Conclusion

This paper is primarily a reflection, focused on culture and identity change among girmitiyas and their Fiji-born descendants. It was the British Indian Indentured Labour System that brought Indian emigrants to Fiji. Like the Pacific island labourers before them, they worked mainly in the plantations of the colony. CSR was the main employer of Indian labour. Girmitiyas survived the extremely harsh conditions of girmit, leaving behind a legacy of struggle in the plantations, and against the racist colonial order. They went through a resilient adaptation process to a new island home. Regaining and affirming their *izzat* (self-respect and dignity) following girmit during the colonial order, became central to this adaptation. Caste system had collapsed. *Fiji Baat* emerged as the lingua franca of the Fiji born. In time the sense of being 'Fiji Indian' took hold. This new identity was reinforced by the political and administrative framework of the colonial and post-colonial Fijian state that classified the country's people into 'races' for differential treatment. Identity politics and the distrust which it engendered eventually resulted in four military coups, and the rapidly forming Indo-Fijian diaspora in Pacific rim-countries.

The sense of being 'Fijian' among Indo-Fijians has increased over time with acculturation, and through their interactions with people of other countries including India. The more relaxed and islandness of Oceanian, and especially iTaukei culture seem to have permeated their being. There has been a sea-change in culture(s) and identity(ies) over the generations between the humble, humiliated, illiterate Indian coolie who worked in plantations, and helped build the Fiji economy and society, and the current generally educated Fijians of Indian descent.

The sense of being 'Fijian' among Indo-Fijians has increased over time with acculturation, and through their sojourn in India and other countries. There has been a sea-change in culture(s) and identity (ies) over the generations between the humble, humiliated, illiterate Indian coolie who worked in plantations, and helped build Fiji economy and society, and the current generally educated Fijians of Indian descent.

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