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Fiji's Relationship with India: The Answer to or the Source of Fiji's Problems?

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SIT Fiji, Fall 2008

Abstract

Fiji is a nation constantly confronted by the difficult realities of having a multicultural population. One of these delicate situations is its relationship with India, the country of origin of Fiji's largest and most controversial minority group, the Indo-Fijians. India has historically taken a great interest in Fiji because of its large population of overseas Indians, a result of the nations' shared colonial heritage. This paper thoroughly examines the nations' past at times rocky relationship in light of race relations, both Indo-Fijian and ethnic Fijian struggles, and decades of political instability from indigenous Fijian eugenics. India's current global standing and the strong ethnic ties of India with Fiji indicate that there are complex costs and benefits to this relationship. In light of Fiji's current need for new international partners, it is paramount to determine whether relations with India are the source of Fiji's political, economic, and cultural problems or a step in the direction of reconciliation between Fiji's two largest and most distinct ethnic groups.

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Introduction

Since the arrival of indentured laborers from India 130 years ago, Fiji has struggled with maintaining harmony among its two largest cultural groups: indigenous Fijians and Fijians of Indian origin, or Indo-Fijians. One of the results of Fiji's considerable overseas Indian population is the ensuing inevitable relationship with India. India has historically taken an interest in Fiji and the ethnic Indians living there, and its concern for the Indo-Fijians was augmented when Fiji gained independence in 1970 and was faced with the task of creating a government that gave fair treatment to citizens of all ethnicities. The two nations have had a strained relationship at times in light of race relations and decades of political instability stemming from indigenous Fijian concerns over their cultural identity. However, today India has emerged as one of Fiji's most critical and controversial international partners.

Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians both have strong, disparate cultural identities and thus numerous racial prejudices and unmerited stereotypes are prevalent in Fiji and have far reaching effects on relations between India and Fiji. India's contemporary rise to worldwide prominence and its strong ethnic ties with Fiji indicate that their relationship could be incredibly beneficial to the uncertain Fijian economy and government of today, a result of four coups occurring within two decades in the island nation. In light of Fiji's need for a change in international supporters, the country must now determine whether past and present relations with India are the ultimate (and original) cause of Fiji's political, economic, and multicultural tribulations or a step in the direction of reconciliation between Fiji's two largest and most distinct ethnic groups.

I will examine the nations' foreign policy history, current day relations, and analyze the future of Fiji and India's relationship in respect to what is best for the Fiji of today.

Comments on Method

My original research objective was to examine the development aid relationship between Fiji and India. However, my initial research led me to alter my investigation to instead examine how the mindset of the racially divided population of Fiji affects economic, political, and cultural relations between India and Fiji. Furthermore, I found that understanding the interactions between the two countries over the past four decades is paramount if one is to recommend the type and degree of relations that Fiji should have with India in the future. There are, of course, other areas that effect the extent and manner in which the two nations are tied together – religion, popular culture, and culinary pursuits being the most influential – but this paper will not focus on the social or religious aspects of the relationship.

The topic of Fiji and India is especially relevant today in Fiji because the nation's traditional ties with Australia and New Zealand are on ice as a result of the unstable political atmosphere plaguing Fiji for the past two decades. Now Fiji is looking to Southeast Asia to replace its' two large Pacific neighbors as its chief economic and political allies. Ethnic conflict within Fiji has without doubt taken a toll on the relationship between Fiji and India, yet they are inescapably bound together by virtue of the large Indian population in Fiji. My status as a *kaivalagi*, or a person from far away, I was able to approach this project unbiased and determine my policy recommendations based solely upon the findings of my research.

While I have collected data in the forms of casual conversations and observations while living and traveling in Fiji from August through December 2008, the crux of my research was primarily conducted throughout the month of November in the said time period. My research was conducted in Suva, the capital city of Fiji, which in addition to housing all government ministries and the largest university in the South Pacific also has the greatest availability of academics and experts pertaining to the subject of my research. I have employed both primary and secondary sources. The historical investigation element of this project utilized brochures, novels, and photographs from the National Archives of Fiji, articles from online databases courtesy of Duke University of Durham, North Carolina, and various articles and novels from the library of the University of the South Pacific, Laucala Bay Campus. Primary sources include speech transcriptions, articles from the Fiji Times, and various interviews.

I chose to interview individuals based on the recommendations of my project advisor, Mr. Aisake Casimira of the Pacific Conference of Churches, and based on their accessibility given my status as a student at the University of the South Pacific (USP). Apart from professors at the University, I interviewed Mr. Kinivuwai, the chairman of the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) Party, Mr. Jaljeet Kumar of the Fijian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Professor Singh of the High Consulate of India. The professors at the University of the South Pacific I interviewed are Dr. Steven Ratuva and Dr. Vijay Naidu. These distinguished academics primarily represent the Faculty of Business and Economics at USP. In choosing interviews, I tried to get an even sampling of qualified people who would be for, against, and neutral on the subject of increased Fijian

governmental relations with India. The interviews were primarily unscripted conversations based around three main points:

- 1) Descriptions of current policies, programs, and other relations with India
- 2) The interviewee's opinion on the future and costs and benefits of Fiji and India's relationship
- 3) Discussion of how ties with India affect the general national psyche and the somewhat unstable political arena in Fiji

The biggest breakthrough in my research came as a result of my second meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at which time I was granted access to their private files on relations with India in four sections – diplomatic relations & defense, trade and commerce with India, services and other personnel agreements, and development assistance given to Fiji. On the other hand, I did meet several limitations throughout the course of my research. I discovered that in Fiji, personal contacts are crucial in getting audiences with people. Having only lived in Fiji for a few months, I do not personally have any contacts in the government or at the university. Almost all of the interviews I conducted were results of phone calls made by my academic advisor, Mrs. Taomi Tapu-Qiliho, or by friends of people I met by chance when wandering around the government buildings in Suva. In addition, being a foreigner, or *kaivalagi*, also made it more difficult to obtain interviews.

One of the biggest setbacks of my research is the lack of public information on Fiji's current and very recent dealings with India. The only resource available for this is the Fiji Times, which while helpful in learning what is released to the public, does not outline any government policies or programs. A direct result of the multiple regimes in

the past two decades, secrecy of government information in Fiji precluded me from reaching the depths of policy research I desired. Fiji's coup culture made research of government foreign policy very difficult because policies are often changing or taken out of practice. Additionally, the current military government is only an interim government, and therefore there is little attention being made to policymaking. I will discuss Fiji's coup-de-etats in relation to foreign policy with India in further detail later in the paper.

Origins of the Indian presence in Fiji

The British were determined to preserve the indigenous Fijian culture and way of life when they reluctantly took charge of Fiji in 1874, at the request of the High Chiefs of Fiji¹. The country was experiencing a period of economic and political hardship, and the Chiefs looked to Great Britain, at the time the largest colonial presence in the world, for guidance. The new rulers recognized the need for economic stability and to that end decided to increase Fiji's agricultural sector in the sugar cane and copra industries. Therefore one of the main problems the first British governor of Fiji, Sir Arthur Gordon, faced upon entering Fiji was a significant dearth of an inexpensive and reliable labor force to work in the plantations of the newly created cash economy².

The culture of indigenous Fijians, having been formed over thousands of years in an isolated, self-sufficient, island nation, made them ill-equipped for the rigors and poor conditions involved with plantation labor³. Moreover, the British certainly did not want to disrupt the lives of their new Fijian subjects, instead desiring to preserve their native

¹ Greico 715

² Lal, Brij. V. Background to Banishment12

³ Ibid.

culture. One of Air Arthur Gordon's first moves as governor was to enact legislation promoting and protecting the Fijian culture and way of life. To safeguard the Fijian *vanua*, he prohibited further land alienation by Europeans and other foreign settlers⁴, and he put an end to future Fijian labor in various foreign industries. The latter was accomplished by Gordon's native policy, which prohibited Fijian migration from villages to work on plantations and instead mandated them remain to in their local surroundings under the traditional authority of their chiefs.

Governor Gordon decided the best course of action would be to form a system of indentured labor using people from their largest colony at the time, India. He reasoned that this had been a successful system in a few other British colonies, such as Trinidad and Mauritius, and there was definitely a large amount of Indians who would be willing to work in Fiji for a few years⁵. Gordon also believed that Indians were very well suited for manual labor, especially in the recently expanded sugar cane industry that was projected to give Fiji an economically viable economy via export revenue.

In 1879, after only five years of British rule, the first boat of Indian *girmitiyas* arrived on Viti Levu marking the origin of the Indian presence in Fiji⁶. These migrants were contracted to work in the farming or manufacturing business and either were after an adventure and change of life as a lower caste Hindu, or, as was the case for the majority of the *girmitiyas*, hoped to find new opportunities, a steady job, and a better life. The first group of *girmitiyas* numbered 479, and was comprised of members of all castes.

⁴ At this time, foreigners living in Fiji included: a small population of Chinese residing in Fiji, as a result of the trade in beche-de-mer, Part-Europeans, migrants from other Pacific islands (namely Tonga and the Solomon Islands), and European settlers.

⁵ Lal, Brij. V. Girit, *History, Memory* 5

⁶ Thakur 358

Each Indian came to Fiji for a minimum of five years of contracted work on a plantation, after which he was permitted to pay his passage back to India if he so desired; alternately, he could work another five years and receive a return passage along with repatriation into his homeland⁷. The agreement, or *gimit*, was voluntary and involved a written contract that contained four main constituents: first, the nature of the work to be done, second, the salary and number of hours of work each day, third, the availability of housing and other relevant facilities, and fourth, a stipulation for a free, non-compulsory return passage to India, as described above⁸. The laborers were largely recruited from northern India through Calcutta until 1903, at which time the recruitment was expanded to include southern India as well, with the migrants departing from Madras⁹.

A small number of Indians came to Fiji freely, as fare-paying adventurers. These individuals were comprised mostly of clerks, entrepreneurs, interpreters, traders, *pundits* and *mullahs*, artisans, and past laborers, having served their time in the indenture system, returning to Fiji with their families¹⁰. The arrival of these free Indians increased with the onset of the 20th century. In 1916, when the Fijian indenture system was discontinued only four years before the system was abolished worldwide, 60,639 *gimitiyas* – men, women, and children – had been imported into the Fiji islands¹¹. Only 40% of the laborers chose to take the return passage back to their homeland; the remaining 60% opted to start a new life in Fiji¹². They could not have known the political, economic, and

⁷ Grieco 716

⁸ Lal, Brij. V. Background to Banishment 13

⁹ These cities are currently known as Kolkata and Chennai, respectively, as a result of a 2005 governmental campaign to eradicate moniker vestiges of British colonization.

¹⁰ Lal, Brij V. Background to Banishment 14

¹¹ Grieco 716

¹² Ibid.

cultural complexities they would face as outsiders making their home in the land of an autochthonous people.

Modern History of Indo-Fijian Relations

Fiji and India are permanently tied together, regardless of the preferences of either country. Both nations share a common British colonial background – a direct consequence of which now binds them together, the *girit* era. India achieved independence from Great Britain on August 15, 1947. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of the independent India, inherited a responsibility to overseas Indians spread out all over the world, however I am only concentrating on the subsequent relations between Fiji and India in this paper. India has historically taken a more residual interest in Fiji-Indians. However, as a direct result of the large Indian population living Fiji, an Indian diplomatic presence was established in Suva in 1948, shortly after India's independence¹³. Because the former *giritiyas* and other Indian migrants were, and continue to be, Fijian citizens subject to Fijian law, India's original policy was to attempt to ensure that their rights and opportunities were equal to those of other citizens¹⁴. Nehru continually emphasized that India's policy toward non-citizen overseas Indians was strictly sentimental and in no way political. This is important when examining the implications of current day relations between Fiji and India.

Fiji was released from its colonial rule on the tenth of October 1970, and the inexperienced indigenous Fijian government was quickly forced to reconcile native political power and land ownership with an economy, and most importantly a population,

¹³ Tinker, Hugh. *The Banyan Tree*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 51, 60

¹⁴ Thakur 358

dominated by Indo-Fijians. The Prime Minister of Fiji at the time, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, recognized the dangers of the racially divided inhabitants in Fiji and in order to reconcile his country of disparate communities he promoted *The Pacific Way*: peace and acceptance of others¹⁵. Prime Minister Mara even visited India several times while in office, thus demonstrating his dedication to maintain a civil relationship with India and reaffirming the Fijian government's commitment to all its' citizens, regardless of their race. His government did, however take action to encourage indigenous Fijian involvement in the nation's economic activities.

Indian participation in the labor in the agricultural sector, education, professional employment, and entrepreneurial pursuits was far greater than that of ethnic Fijians¹⁶. The Fijian government has continually created affirmative action programs – mostly in the form of petty loans, grants, and scholarships - in order to stimulate indigenous involvement in the economy and education¹⁷. Surprisingly, Indian diplomats embraced these policies rather than take offense at the racial implications. They have compared these strategies to ones undertaken by their own Congress Party to help the disadvantaged in their own country. Whether indigenous Fijians should be considered a “disadvantaged” group in their homeland, however, is debatable. In 1975, a member of Parliament by the name of Sakeasi Butadroka placed before parliament a motion calling for all Fijians of Indian ethnicity to be sent back to India¹⁸. The motion was rejected. However, This policy formed the foundation for a new, prominent political party: the Fijian Nationalist

¹⁵ Ibid. 359

¹⁶ Thakur 359

¹⁷ Aisake Casimara, interview

¹⁸ Brown, Ganguly 468

Party (FNP). These strong anti-Indian sentiments are still very evident among Fijian nationalists today.

One of the most significant events in modern Indo-Fijian relations was Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's four-day visit to Fiji in 1981¹⁹. She remains the only India Prime Minister to ever make a diplomatic visit to the Pacific nation, although Fijian Prime Ministers have traveled to India on multiple occasions. During her visit, Prime Minister Gandhi noted that the Indian community in Fiji had not received a proportional share in the government, and that Fiji certainly had challenges ahead of it in order to treat its multicultural population as equals²⁰. In addition, she made it clear that there can be policies enacted that allow Indo-Fijians to maintain their cultural heritage and sense of pride in their identity, "only if they do not impinge on the national interest"²¹. The visit from such a respected and well-known world leader caused much excitement in Fiji, received a positive response from Fijians of all ethnicities, and made Fijians want to increase their country's political, economic, and cultural engagement with India.

The year 1979 marked the 100th anniversary of the Indian presence in Fiji and the occasion was widely celebrated throughout the country. This is also representative of how Fijians saw India as an international ally, a country with which they were excited to have an inevitable, binding relationship. The Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, personally chaired the multiracial planning committee for the festivities, which included a *meke*, dramas about the arrival of the *girmitiyas*, sports competitions, music by the national military band, food, games, and a ceremony honoring the handful of original

¹⁹ Thakur 360

²⁰ Thakur 364

²¹ Thakur 365

girmityas still living²². Most telling of the political attitude toward Indo-Fijians is an excerpt from a speech given by Ratu Sir George Cakobau, the Governor-General, during the celebration:

“Our Indian friends and their forefathers have worked hard for themselves and for Fiji – they have had a big hand in shaping what we see in this country today. I sincerely pray that they enjoy living in their adopted home and that peace and prosperity will prevail in this country of ours in the next hundred years²³.”

His sentiments were not unusual in the Fiji of the day. While Fiji certainly had a multicultural population, there was little racial prejudice and hatred toward Indians. Within ten years, this harmony between the races would be only a thing of the past. The minimal, non-controversial relations that Fiji had had with India since independence were not to continue as such for long; indigenous Fijians’ fear and distrust of the Indo-Fijian race would begin to grow over the next decade, culminating in 1987 at the start of Fiji’s unfortunate “coup culture,” which effectively marked the beginning of political skepticism on both sides and the deterioration of Fiji’s relationship with India.

The Beginning of Fiji’s Racially Charged Coup Culture

The year 1987 saw two coups in Fiji, followed by another in the year 2000 and yet another in December of 2006. This study will primarily concentrate on the Indo-Fijian foreign affairs effects of the two most recent governmental overhauls, however I will touch upon the drastic changes as a result of the coups of 1987 as it provides a basis for

²² Lal Girit History, Memory 2

²³ Ibid.

better understanding of India and Fiji's relationship today. In an election ten years earlier, an Indo-Fijian led opposition party won a majority of house seats; these results were dismissed, and another election was held in order to restore power to the Fijian community. In April 1987, an alliance led by Dr. Timoci Bavadra, an indigenous Fijian backed by the Indo-Fijian community, won the general election. This time, new elections were not held and Dr. Bavadra became the Prime Minister of Fiji's first majority Indian government. This was an accurate representation of the population of Fiji at the time, with a slightly greater number of Indo-Fijians than ethnic Fijians residing in Fiji²⁴.

Less than a month later, Fiji's first coup took place as a result of racial tensions. Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka forcibly removed Prime Minister Bavadra from office during his military coup on May 14, 1987. Rabuka was determined to gain power quickly and became frustrated by the ensuing months of negotiation stalemate. Thus, he staged another coup on September 25, 1987, this time using a greater amount of his military power. Rabuka's government then revoked the constitution, in place since Fijian independence, and declared Fiji a republic on October 10th. The reason for the 1987 coups was clearly to keep Indo-Fijians from having political power, and this extreme action against the marginalized ethnically Indian community caused indignation across the globe.

One of the most concerned countries was India, understandably so. India immediately posed sanctions against trade and lessened diplomatic ties with Fiji. In the months following the coups, India used its influence in multi-national organizations, two of the most relevant being the Commonwealth of Nations and the United Nations to

²⁴ Fiji: A Historical and Ethno-cultural Background

lobby for sanctions against Fiji on behalf of the Indo-Fijians²⁵. Fiji was expelled from the Commonwealth of Nations for having an illegitimate regime in power in 1987, an action supported by the protests of the Indian government²⁶. By 1989, foreign relations between India and Fiji had become very minimal, as India was concerned for the well-being of the Indo-Fijian community, of which over 12,000 had fled the country by this time²⁷. This mass Indo-Fijian exodus produced a massive brain drain on the Fijian population, the effects of which are still being felt in the country today. Ties between India and Fiji were completely severed in 1991 when Fiji's new constitution, which made it impossible for Indo-Fijians to obtain a political majority, was ratified and approved in the elections²⁸.

Although ties were severed, India did not lose concern for its Fijian people. The Indian government paid close attention to the activities of Fiji politics and race relations, especially to the recommendations of Fiji's Constitutional Review Commission, finalized in 1997, noting the treatment of Indo-Fijians in the constitutional reforms²⁹. The most notable of the Commission's recommendations were for an increase in the size of Parliament, a smaller proportion of seats set aside for each ethnic group, an appointed president and vice-president appointed by the unelected Fijian Council of Chiefs, and most significantly, opened the position of Prime Minister to candidates of all races³⁰.

The Constitution Amendment Act was unanimously approved by Parliament in July 1997³¹. The Government of India was pleased with the changes, and Fiji was

²⁵ Fiji (10/08)

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Interview with Jaljeet Kumar, Fiji Ministry of Foreign Affairs

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Indian Embassy

³⁰ Fiji (10/08)

readmitted to the Commonwealth of Nations. Ethnic Fijians and Indo-Fijians were now allocated racial seats proportional to their numbers in Fiji at the time, and twenty-five seats were not race-based – a big step away from the vestiges of the racially based, “divide and rule” policies employed by the British at the turn of the century.

An Indo-Fijian PM and the 2000 Coup

An Indo-Fijian man by the name of Mahendra Chaudhry forever altered the course of Fijian political history when he was elected Prime Minister of Fiji in the year 1999, a result of the first elections since the new constitution was ratified³². His service as Prime Minister was short, as one year later on May 19th, 2000 the government was overthrown a third time and Chaudhry was forcibly removed from office at gunpoint³³. A man named Laisenia Qarase was brought to power as the Prime Minister, along with his party, the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL Party). The coup, so clearly carried out because of the ethnicity of the new prime minister, caused quite a sensation internationally. Many nations, among them Australia and New Zealand, and international trade unions imposed a variety of sanctions on Fiji. Fiji’s relationship with Australia and New Zealand has never recovered³⁴. The two nations even issued travel advisories to its citizens asking them not to vacation in Fiji; tourism revenue in Fiji correspondingly declined³⁵. One of the most harmful effects of the 2000 coup was on the Fiji economy.

³² Fiji (10/08)

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Asia – Pacific Economic Update 163

³⁵ The Times of India

Now the brain drain and rise in unemployment that occurred as many Indo-Fijians migrated and Fiji lost a great deal of skilled workers and professionals³⁶.

The Indian government condemned the coup and called for a return to democracy in Fiji. India was also dismayed at the attacks towards Fijians of Indian ethnicity that occurred in the weeks following the coup³⁷. As the two nations did not have strong economic or political relations at the time, a consequence of the 1987 coups, India continued to uphold its' policy of concern over the situation and plight of the Indo-Fijians without taking considerable action against Fiji, apart from economic and political sanctions.

The 2006 Coup and Subsequent Stronger Relationship with India

All of Fiji's international relations were strained again at the end of 2006, when the military took over the government, suspending the constitution and removing Prime Minister Qarase from office. Commodore Bainimarama claimed he was justified in overthrowing the Fijian government on December 6th, 2006 because he had military knowledge of deep-seeded corruption in the current regime³⁸. In addition, as the head of the deposed regime, Qarase had implemented a very lenient policy toward those who instigated the 2000 coup, and this angered many people in Fiji. Commodore Bainimarama was one of these people, and he felt that he had no choice but to overthrow the government and "reluctantly" assume the Presidency³⁹.

³⁶ Asia – Pacific Economic Update 163

³⁷ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

³⁸ Fraenkel 428

³⁹ Asia-Pacific Economic Update 163

India's first official statement concerning the 2006 coup, given by their spokesman for the Ministry of External Affairs, Navtej Sarna, succinctly expressed its sympathies in the time of instability for the citizens of Fiji:

“We are saddened to learn about the turn of events in Fiji and hope that the rule of law will prevail and power will be returned to the people at the earliest... India greatly values its relations with Republic of Fiji Islands, a country with which we share historical and cultural links⁴⁰.”

The Indian did not impose sanctions or take any other restrictive action against Fiji, a markedly different response than it had had to the past three coups. As this was the first coup not targeting the Indo-Fijian community, India had no reason to strongly condemn the military takeover⁴¹. India's reaction would prove to be a blessing for the Fijian people because of the reaction of Fiji's most crucial neighbors, Australia and New Zealand. Both nations were quite displeased by the political upheaval and suspension of democracy yet again in Fiji, and their respective relationships with Fiji took a turn for the worse, leaving the Fijian economy and government in an even more precarious state of affairs⁴².

Soon after the coup Fiji began its “Look North” policy and began concentrating much of its foreign affairs on China and, ironically, India⁴³ instead of continuing to rely on Australia, New Zealand, and other Pacific Island nations. This was only partly by choice; faced with a failing economy and hostility from Australia and New Zealand, Commodore Bainimarama was forced to call upon other nations as trade partners.

⁴⁰ Island Business

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Asia Pacific Economic Update 163

⁴³ Interview with Jaljeet Kumar, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Fiji is the most advanced of the Pacific Islands and desires to be on the forefront of world issues and trends; this includes turning to India and China for economic exchanges and other foreign affairs. Many people in Fiji are aware that their government has implemented a “Look North” policy and can recognize the confidence in government and national financial security that this international strategy creates. The most recent coup provided an unlikely an opportunity for India to stick by the small country and show its allegiance to all the people of Fiji. India may have been condemned internationally for continuing to engage with the new regime, in 2006 and 2007, but Fiji responded by ratcheting up Indo-Fijian relations and making their interactions public, a milestone in Fijian governmental proceedings.

Relations Between India and Fiji Today

The four main areas of relations between the governments of Fiji and India are diplomatic and defense, trade relations, services agreements, and development assistance⁴⁴. Apart from that, the countries also interact quite a bit through the tourism industry and the world of academia. The Fijian government has worked with airlines serving Nadi International Airport, such as Qantas and Air New Zealand to expand their destinations and transport hubs in Southeast Asia in an attempt to lure more Indian tourists to Fiji as a popular location for holidays and vacations⁴⁵. The improvement in air connectivity from India to Fiji with better connections, reduced costs, and more travel packages being offered by travel agents such as SOTC has markedly increased Indian tourism in Fiji, improving both the Fijian economy and their foreign relations. The Indian

⁴⁴ Jaljeet Kumar

⁴⁵ Steven Ratuva

Cultural Center has arranged several scholarship programs for Fijian citizens of all ethnicities to study and travel in India, and there are a number of other independent programs that have similar goals of breaching the cultural divide through academia.

Today, approximately 37% of Fiji's population is of Indian descent, while ethnic Fijians comprise around 57% of the population⁴⁶. For this reason, India is very sentimental toward its overseas descendants in Fiji. India continues to have relations with Fiji, the Pacific Island with which it has the strongest ties and, incidentally, the Pacific Island that has the largest number of inhabitants of Indian ethnicity. Recently, the establishment of a formal dialogue mechanism called the Fiji – India Foreign Office Consultations (FOC), held annually, increased communication between the two countries and cemented their formal relationship for years to come⁴⁷. Ajay Singh, the former Indian High Commissioner to Fiji, said in May 2007 that after the 2006 coup, the Indian government had decide to pursue a policy of engagement with the military interim regime instead of isolating it. He explained that India would continue to pledge assistance and respect Fiji, regardless of the fact that it is a small and vulnerable country⁴⁸. This is the logical response from India to ensure that the interim government remembers to respect the rights of its Indo-Fijian citizens if Fiji wants to continue receiving aid, military assistance, and IT developments from India.

⁴⁶ Fiji (10/08)

⁴⁷ About the Commission

⁴⁸ People's Daily Online

An Indirect Form of Racism

One will not find many instances of blatant racism and racial prejudice in Fiji. The people of Fiji are indeed representative of the tolerant and polite “Pacific way;” the vast majority of Fijian citizens are peaceful and welcoming toward people of all ethnic backgrounds. Instead, racism is veiled by the strong racial identities and stereotypes present in everyday life. Momentarily ignoring the race-based politics, affirmative action policies, and history of racial tension in the past governing regimes of Fiji, emphasis on race is only seen on a more personal level.

Living in Fiji for almost four months, I have grown accustomed to hearing racial stereotypes of Indians and ethnic Fijians and race being a central factor in any story. For example, when telling a story to some of my indigenous Fijian friends about a man who had made a disparaging comment to me on the street, my listeners first response was, “He was Indian or Fijian?” This is not an isolate incident; the ethnicity question is common and limited to neither ethnic Fijians nor Indo-Fijians. A friend of mine was on the phone with her Fijian friend while riding in a taxi, and her friend made a point of asking her the ethnicity of the driver. While discussing my stay in Fiji with an Indian woman over dinner, she first inquired as to the race of my homestay family. If a violent news story comes up in conversation, the race of the perpetrator is always divulged.

Many Indo-Fijians stereotype Fijians as lazy and merely sitting around drinking kava each night instead of working. A popular typecast of Indo-Fijians among indigenous Fijians is that they are a dishonest, power-hungry race that will do anything to get ahead in life. It is not that either ethnic group especially dislikes or is prejudiced against the other, but rather that there is little racial intermixing. In many instances, lunch breaks at

work, multicultural school recess, and other social areas such as bars and parks one finds groups sitting together based upon their ethnic group. The language and cultural difference is to blame for much of the racial misunderstandings and lack of voluntary interaction. All of these things also affect the ties between Fiji and India on a large-scale level, as I examine below. The racial misconceptions and stereotypes spill over into common perceptions of each nation as a whole and influence their economic, political, and cultural exchanges.

Economic Exchanges

One of the greatest benefits to Fiji from relations with India is Indian investment in Fiji's economy. These investments are mainly through trade, IT enhancements, and development aid given to Fiji. Fiji is very much favored by their trade relationship, importing sugar, technology, clothing, food products, and other items from India. A general expansion in trade between the two countries starting in the year 2003 led to a noticeable increase in exports from Fiji to India.

The sugar industry, in which India is the world leader, is Fiji's main agricultural export and largest crop. India has helped the sugar industry in Fiji by facilitating technical assistance through the Sugar Technology Mission (STM) and financial assistance via a soft loan of Fiji \$86 million, courtesy of the Export-Import Bank of India⁴⁹. Investment interest in Fiji's economy by India has been demonstrated through greater FDI flows from India to Fiji with Indian Multi-National Companies, for example Apollo and Taj, proposing to undertake considerable and meaningful economic

⁴⁹ About the Commission

investments. In recent years India has supplied instruments of co-operation in various sectors such as Sugar, Health & Pharmaceuticals, Tourism, ICT, and Trade⁵⁰.

Racial stereotypes overflow into economic activities between India and Fiji, greatly effecting trade in certain areas with India. A common belief among indigenous Fijians is that goods from India are shoddily made because ethnic Indians are inherently corrupt. Goods made in India often do not sell as well as those made elsewhere. Mr. Kinivuwai, chairman of the SDL Party, put it bluntly, “unit cost of items from India is much more expensive and, no offense, they are poorer quality goods than those from Australia and New Zealand. For some reason, Fiji continues to include India as a large trade partner.” His belief about the quality of India’s export goods has been echoed by other indigenous Fijians. Even Dr. Steven Ratuva, a professor of Business and Economics at the University of the South Pacific, pointed out that many indigenous Fijians do not want to buy Indian made goods because they are suspicious of the quality as India has a great deal of poverty, despite the fact that it is a world leader in some areas. There is a considerable information dissemination gap in many Fijians’ knowledge of the economic activities between India and Fiji. For example, Mr. Kinivuwai summed up the SDL party’s beliefs saying:

“We don’t need India as a strategic trade partner because the repercussions of our trade with them will take over fifty years for our country to recover from. Trade gives India the access to our political

⁵⁰ About the Commission

environment there, and in order to prohibit them from entering the political arena of Fiji we must discontinue trading with them⁵¹.”

In order to alter these beliefs, Fijians must see the positive effects of economic activity with India on a more basic level. However, this transparency is not easily attainable in Fiji. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs keeps all of its files on government interaction with India confidential, a step in the wrong direction in racial tolerance and a disservice to the very people that India’s economic assistance to Fiji helps⁵².

Political Issues

Fiji’s racially charged political instability of more than two decades has made its relationship with India ever changing. Currently, relations between the two countries are the best they have been since the first coup of 1987. The Fijian government is certainly benefiting from many of its programs with India. The government of India closely follows the political situation in Fiji in regards to political reforms and governmental changes and how they affect the Indo-Fijian community in Fiji. They maintain that they desire for the government of Fiji and the Fijian constitution to be “democratic, just, non-discriminatory, and acceptable to all the communities living in Fiji⁵³.”

Although the Indian government was never proven to have meddled in Fijian politics, multiple elections in the recent past have swirled with conspiracy theories concerning India’s role in Fijian politics. For example, during the elections of 1982, Prime Minister Mara very publicly claimed that there was an Indian-Soviet conspiracy to

⁵¹ Interview with Peceli Kinivuwat

⁵² Interview with Jaljeet Kumar

⁵³ Indian Embassy

oust him from office⁵⁴. Mara maintained that the Soviets had given the High Commission of India in Suva one million dollars to help finance the Indo-Fijian favored Opposition Party's campaign. India, the Soviet Union, and the Opposition strongly rejected these charges, and upon further investigation they were proven false. The outrageous accusation significantly injured Fiji and India's relationship.

Racial stereotypes also play a large part in fueling ethnic Fijian concerns about Indo-Fijian influence in the government. A common stereotype among many indigenous Fijians is that Indians value power and success more than anything else and will do anything to get ahead⁵⁵. This stereotype is also prevalent among the next generation of professionals and academics in Fiji: students at the University of the South Pacific in Suva. This negative image is only exacerbated by the fact that 99-100% of students caught cheating at the university are of Indian descent⁵⁶. As a result, many students believe that all Indians are corrupt and will bring corruption into the government if they have strong representation.

Increased cooperation and stronger foreign affairs with India worry many indigenous Fijians that the government will be under Indian control. Mr. Kinivuwai, the chairman and mouthpiece of the Fijian nationalist Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) Party, believes that the coups on Fiji are all consequences of Fijian ties with India. He maintains that "the influence of India and the Indian communities in Fiji have had a very negative effect in the minds of the indigenous populations and this is

⁵⁴ Thakur 362-363

⁵⁵ Fiji: A Historical and Ethno-cultural Background 20

⁵⁶ Dr. Steven Ratuva

unacceptable⁵⁷.” The SDL Party, which was unseated in the 2006 coup, believes that “if Fiji continues to encourage trade with India, we are taking away Fiji’s sovereignty and encouraging Indian control of Fiji⁵⁸.” However, under his party’s nationalist government, India was a key trade partner especially in the sugar industry, India provided IT help to governmental sectors, and educational ties with India were augmented. IN addition, the Prime Minister at the time, Qarase, visited India to open the Fijian High Commission in New Delhi in an attempt to maintain their relationship in light of cooled relations between Fiji and Australia and New Zealand⁵⁹.

Largely a result of colonial “divide and rule” policies, many ethnic Fijians today simply do not trust Indo-Fijians, and therefore do not trust their motherland, India⁶⁰. Racial identities are so strong in this multi-racial society that indigenous Fijians believe that in the political arena, Indo-Fijians will manipulate policies and give the country over to a dependency on India, therefore putting their ethnicity over their nationalistic pride at being citizen of Fiji. Essentially, a great number of indigenous Fijians secretly believe that Indo-Fijians are determined to take away the “Fijianness” of the country, and instead make Indian the vanua, the culture, and the economy of Fiji. This does not bode well in the average ethnic Fijian’s opinion for increased ties with India. As Mr. Kinivuwai puts it, “we do not need to engage with a country when all we get at the end of the day is political instability⁶¹.” However, India is an emerging world power, and it might be a beneficial move for Fiji to engage in political diplomacy and other relations with India

⁵⁷ Peceli Kinivuwai interview

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ The Hindustan Times

⁶⁰ Thakur 360

⁶¹ The Hindustan Times

and take advantage, for lack of a better term, of its ethnic connections with the leading nation.

Cultural Dissemination

The building of new constituencies of knowledge and sensitivity may in turn establish durable relationships that help preserve amity between two countries through the vagaries of international politics. – Ramesh Thakur

Many forms of cultural exchanges are bound to occur when people groups of two deep cultural identities, such as Indian and indigenous Fijian, live side by side. When Indians first came to Fiji, the British developed divisive policies in order to maintain the Fijians' communal way of life and keep the Indian migrants working hard on the sugar cane plantations – without any interaction between the two groups⁶². Unfortunately, this developed a general distrust between the two groups and consequently widespread cultural misunderstandings and misconceptions, most of which are still prevalent in society in Fiji today. The government of India desires to engage in a mutually fulfilling exchange of ideas and information with Fiji, thereby encouraging the dissemination of Indian culture within Fiji without overpowering the island nation's cultural heritage and offending its' indigenous peoples.

The Indian Cultural Centre, located in Suva, was established in the 1970's with the mission of promoting cultural understanding about India and its people. The Centre also aims to disseminate awareness within Fiji of India's scientific prowess and intellectual achievements in order to make India an appealing economic and political

⁶² Thakur 360

partner to Fiji, which is still a developing nation. Most Indians would not recognize that fostering cultural relations with Fiji is a step towards world unity, however cultural diplomacy is undeniably an important element in maintaining cooperation and goodwill between the two nations. In Fiji, the Indian Cultural Centre is a much more public face of India than the High Commission of India, although the two often work together and are reached by the same telephone number⁶³. The Centre gives lessons on traditional Indian dance, song, and instruments, has a yoga teacher who works at both their Lautoka and Suva facilities, and programs on general Indian culture and history.

The opportunity for academic exchange is one of the most alluring aspects of relations between India and Fiji. Professor Madhavir Singh, the current director of the Indian Cultural Centre, points out that while there are very few Indians who travel to Fiji to study, there are a significant number of Fijians, both Indo-Fijians and ethnic Fijians, who participate in academic studies in India. Fiji is certainly the beneficiary in these exchanges. The past five years have seen a greater flow of students from Fiji seeking higher education in India and an increase in technical co-operation with the Government of India offering more programs to Fijian citizens⁶⁴. Dr. Steven Ratuva of the University of the South Pacific, a well-known ethnic Fijian professor, is quite excited by the opportunities being formed for professors at the University to travel to India for academic work. When asked if he would participate in such a program, he replied “Certainly! I have always wanted to go to India.” Among academics, opinions of strong relations between India and Fiji are almost always positive.

⁶³ Madhavir Singh

⁶⁴ About the Commission

The most well known scholarship provided by the Indian Cultural Centre is the General Cultural Scholarship Scheme, which fully finances 25 students' studies in New Delhi for three to five years and covers all areas of study. Other popular options are scholarships for studying Hindi language, a self-financing scheme with spots reserved for Fijians, medical schools in India, and an IT program for government officials that incorporates short term specialized courses⁶⁵. When asked the ethnicity of the programs' participants, Professor Singh skirts around a response, saying "the programs are open to Fiji citizens of any race." When pressed, he admits that there are not many indigenous Fijians studying in India solely because there is a lack of information for them and they do not know that it is possible to study there. This information seems shocking in light of the fact that the Indian Cultural Centre has been operating for over thirty years in Fiji, and supposedly targets Fijians of all ethnicities.

In spite of its good intentions, the Indian Cultural Centre may eventually prove more damaging than beneficial to the Indo-Fijian population. First, by sustaining and promoting the Indian identity, it persistently dilutes the Fijian and Indo-Fijian identity. Professor Singh claims, "Indians have ancestry in common, that attachment is important. For that reason they need facilities to increase their knowledge their ancestry." The Centre would be playing right into the policies of a racially divided government if too great an emphasis is placed on identifying with one's own ethnic heritage and cultural community. While relations between India and Fiji are important, it is equally important that all Fijians remember that they are citizens of Fiji and must put nationalistic pride before ethnic pride if Fiji is to move past its racially divided roots.

⁶⁵ Madhavir Singh

Should Fiji Augment Relations with India?

The main points to consider⁶⁶ when answering the question posed above are the cooled relations between Fiji and Australia and New Zealand, Fiji's need for cheaper goods and technological advances, the unstable political situation in Fiji, past and current tensions between the ethnic Fijian and Indo-Fijian communities, the toll that the brain drain of the past ten years has taken on the Fijian economy and world of academia, the large population of overseas Indians living in Fiji, and Fiji's desire to become a larger global competitor. Each of these areas, when examined closely, indicate in which direction Fiji's foreign policy with India should go: it should be expanded, particularly in the areas of services agreements, academic exchanges, and trade policies.

The answer to lessening the tensions between the two very strong and conflicting racial identities present in Fiji lies in increasing Fiji's foreign relations with India. Cultural education and scholarship programs help, but they cannot change the minds of all indigenous Fijians. Public programs and policies regarding India, such as IT advancements for Fiji and educational and development assistance that do not target any specific race, will lessen suspicion in ethnic Fijian minds and show them that India is not after ethnic control of Fiji. The improved government-to-government co-operation between India and Fiji in recent years has only had positive consequences for both governments in regards to domestic policies, international co-operation and common development goals⁶⁷. Ostensibly, public programs will prove the Fijian nationalists wrong and convince all Fijians to embrace the Indo-Fijian community for what it has

⁶⁶ These points are listed in no particular order of importance or urgency.

⁶⁷ About the Commission

given for the betterment of Fiji – because working in the sugar cane industry as *giritiyas* to improve the deteriorating Fijian economy was not enough.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Foreign relations between India and Fiji will follow any one of three main paths in the near future: increase as a result of economic and developmental necessity, decrease because of political complications and racism, or increase as Fiji's relationship with its traditional international partners, Australia and New Zealand, deteriorates. The most promising interactions between India and Fiji that are currently in the works are MOUs and Agreements on Water Resource Management, Coconut and Coir Industries, Double Taxation Agreement are proposed including improvement of the Fiji/ India Air Services Agreement⁶⁸.

The main policy problem in Fiji in regards to Indian representation in the political arena is the original form of governance system in Fiji as drafted by the British almost a century ago. The British did not foresee the *giritiyas* becoming the ethnic majority in Fiji, much less ever needing governmental representation. A fellow product (or victim?) of British colonialism, India understands the sources of the difficulties faced by Indo-Fijians. Furthermore, the Indian government relates to the checks and balances needed to maintain a multicultural society, as India is an enormous country made up of people with starkly different languages, customs, political views, and financial stability, just to name a few.

⁶⁸ About the Commission

Increased interaction and agreements with India can only help the people of Fiji. Cultural hegemony from Indians will not be a consequence of stronger ties between the two nations. Instead, cultural integration as a result of economic and political policies with India will only neutralize the arguments of Fijian nationalists. The distinct indigenous Fijian culture is extraordinarily resilient; the only cultural Indian integration that occurs will be voluntary and small scale, such as Fijians adding curries and dhal to their diets. As Fiji emerges from its decades of political instability and race based politics, it should turn to India as a steady and beneficial economic, political, and cultural international partner and, most importantly, understand and take advantage of the unique opportunities afforded to the Pacific nation as a result of the presence of its' Indo-Fijian citizens.

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Glossary of Terms

- Commonwealth of Nations** A voluntary group of nations that were colonized by the British and have since gained independence. The Commonwealth is comprised of 53 nations and includes such countries as India, Canada, Australia, Fiji, and the United Kingdom.
- Girmit** A corruption of the word “agreement,” this refers to the entire indenture experience and time period.
- Girmitiyas** The name given to the Indian migrants who came to Fiji as part of the indentured labor system.
- Kava** Also known as yaqona, kava is a narcotic root crop found in the Pacific that is powdered, ground into water, and consumed to relax without disrupting mental clarity.
- Meke** A Fijian word that refers to all styles of Fijian traditional dance and is normally performed for ceremonies, festivals, and other special occasions.
- Mullah** In the case of Indian migrants to Fiji, this term refers to a Muslim learned in Islamic theology and sacred law, who endeavored to come to Fiji to teach and coach Muslim girmitiyas about Islam.
- Kaivalagi** The Fijian word for foreigner, it literally translates as “a person from far away.”
- Pundit** In this paper, this term refers to a native of India who was trained and employed by the British to survey inaccessible regions beyond the British frontier.
- SDL Party** The Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua is the largest and most powerful Fijian nationalist party. It had the political majority under Prime Minister Qarase but was removed from power by the military in the 2006 coup.
- Vanua** In Fijian, this word refers to land in a larger sense of the physical earth, waters, and flora and fauna to which an indigenous Fijian belongs. A Fijian is born to his or her vanua and therefore that land area is naturally his or hers.