

Hon. Laisenia Qarase, Prime Minister and Minister for Fijian Affairs, Culture & Heritage, Minister for National Reconciliation & Unity; ALTA & Sugar Industry Reforms

Address at the Ceremony to Dedicate the Site of the University of Fiji

Mar 6, 2006, 12:40

Distinguished Officials of the University and of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha,
Honourable Ministers,
Your Excellencies,
Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Ladies and gentlemen.

It is truly an honour for me to be with you today for the dedication of this new university. I regard this occasion as the latest step in an epic journey. It is a journey for our country, and for the founders of this institution. They carry forward a legacy of hope and faith from their forebears.

The education of our children, the nurturing of young minds for successful citizenship and careers, has been at the very heart of our Government's mission for Fiji.

We believe that a well-educated nation has the best chance of reaching its total promise.

It was this fundamental conviction that led us to launch a comprehensive agenda for reform. We have taken action to improve standards, provide better access to schools and higher learning and to reduce the cost of education. If the children of poor farmers or villagers cannot afford to go to school, then our society has failed them. Every child has the right to decent schooling and to go on to tertiary studies.

One of our central aims is to assist each family in Fiji to have at least one child attain university or other higher qualifications.

I am pleased to say that Fiji has achieved near universal primary education and more children are receiving secondary education. We have accomplished a primary net enrolment rate of 98 per cent and national literacy rate of 92.2 per cent. Secondary education net enrolment stands at 76 per cent. More disadvantaged students from all our communities are receiving funding for university places and positions in other post-secondary institutions.

Each year, since we have been in Government, education has received the biggest slice of the Budget. In 2006 we will be spending more than \$300 million, an increase of \$40 million over 2005.

I give you this brief summary of my Government's attitude to education for a reason. It underlines something very significant for this occasion.

The SDL Coalition and the motivating spirits behind this new university, have a shared belief in the high importance of education. It is this that has drawn us together, here, with a collective national purpose. It is above politics and sectional interests.

We are co-operating in a visionary scheme that will open the doors to advanced learning and intellectual growth for more of our young people.

The building blocks for constructing the campus on this site are, in a very real way, building blocks for the making of our nation. The graduates from here will join others in the vanguard of our drive to turn Fiji into a developed country, well placed to take its position in a world of fast and transforming change.

Those who conceived this new institution are acting with the same boldness of heart and foresight of the

settlers from India who came to Fiji at the end of the 19th century. The ancestors of our Indian community of today crossed the “black waters” to seek new opportunities in these islands of the far South Seas.

They would toil as indentured workers on sugar plantations in conditions of uncertainty, exploitation and cruel hardship. They came through, ladies and gentlemen, they endured. They were freed from “girit” and made a new life here.

They struggled, worked hard, saved, and improved their living standards. To them, education was the golden key to the future. It was said the feelings of the Indians of Fiji towards education was like the attitude of the Fijians to their land.

But in the Colonial era, education supported by the State was for the select few.

Fijian village schools were mostly under the control of the Methodist Church.

The Indians were left to themselves.

So they built and managed their own schools. They came together, raised funds from their meagre resources and constructed classrooms in the canefields, the settlements and the towns.

It was an epic endeavour, an extraordinary example of a community’s determination to see its children educated.

This was not just about “reading, writing and arithmetic.” The Indian community wanted their schools to offer the same academic standards they observed in the elite European establishments.

The journey to the liberation that comes from learning and knowledge was long and hard. Eventually the Indian community and their schools became part of the education partnership between Governments and the people. This has gained strength since Independence. Our Government has much confidence in it.

It is one of the finest examples anywhere of a State and its citizens standing together in support of a common cause.

At the Education Summit last year, I described this as one of the most powerful social alliances in Fiji. It could not function without our Indian citizens and their religious and social organisations.

As the decades passed and Fiji moved towards Independence, the leaders and educators among the Indians clung to an idea that would represent the pinnacle of their dreams for educating their children.

Primary and secondary schools have been established. The University of the South Pacific is providing places for university education. But because the need has to serve the region, it is unable to fully meet the needs of Fiji’s own increasing numbers of successfully matriculating students. A new thinking began to emerge.

Why not a full locally and privately owned university that would cater to the needs of Fiji’s students with recognised international standards of qualifications and academic excellence? The thinking was ambitious, the challenges enormous. The focus was on what was good and in the long term interest of Fiji.

It took Dr Ganesh Chand and some of his academic colleagues to develop the project in detail. Their effort in developing the concept is greatly appreciated. What they envisaged was embraced by one of Fiji’s most pre-eminent religious and social organisations, the Arya Samaj and its national body, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha.

Let me pay tribute here to the Arya Samaj and the Sabha. For more than a century, the Arya Samaj movement has played its part in Fiji. It has travelled with the country from colony to sovereign

nationhood, through the last decades of the 20th century, and then into the new millennium.

The Arya Samaj helped Girmityas, and those who followed, find meaning and a sense of purpose and community in the land that was to become their home.

It has an outstanding record of service guided by the principles that light the path marked out in 1875 by its founder Swami Dayanand Saraswati.

The Arya Samaj brought to Fiji the Swami's teachings of truth, love, righteousness and justice, directed towards the overriding goal of promoting the betterment of all.

When I spoke at the opening of the Arya Samaj centenary celebrations in 2004, I said that the Swami's legacy was shining out in that gathering. It shines today on what we have come here to honour and celebrate.

I have the greatest admiration for what the Arya Samaj and the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha have achieved in providing an education for generations of our young.

Working with the Government in that partnership of which I have just spoken, the Sabha serves some 10,000 students in 14 primary schools, six secondary schools, and a commercial school. It operates several kindergartens, and a Vedic religious training centre. The Sabha also has a valuable and appreciated role in closing the education gap between Fijian children and other students. This is a sensitive and critical issue. I think we all understand it must be addressed to ensure balanced and stable development of the nation.

I extend thanks to the Sabha for what it is doing for Fijian students, and to all the other Indian schools and education organisations that cater for Fijians. They have willingly taken in indigenous children, to the point where they are often in the majority.

This is another immeasurable contribution to the building of this nation.

I am uplifted by the new university's willingness to actively encourage Fijian higher education. As I have said so often, this is not about creating an advantage for some, at the expense of others. It is about achieving equality and fashioning a foundation for continuing peace and stability.

Let it be known that our purpose is to seek a better education at a reduced cost for all children, regardless of race, religion and culture. Our record fully demonstrates what we have done to achieve this.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Sabha's decision to join with Dr. Chand and his associates was a turning point for the university project. As well as its experience in managing educational institutions, the Sabha provided crucial financial support. Its involvement brought to fruition a resolution the Sabha passed in 1956 about expanding into university education.

It took a long time for this to happen, but the step was finally taken.

I now want to make a statement for the record.

I confirm that I strongly support this outstanding initiative to provide increased opportunities for university and tertiary level education for the young people of Fiji. It is also a direct show of confidence in Fiji and its enormous potential. It is this kind of confidence that has spurred our national recovery in the last five years.

The vision and the aspirations of those who have brought the university this far is identical with the Government's objectives.

We seek to strengthen the partnership principle, improve standards, widen choice and use education, not only for personal growth, but as a tool for national advancement.

I have had meetings on the project with Dr Chand and Honourable Kamlesh Arya, President of the Sabha. Both are members of the Opposition in Parliament. But they have not let their political affiliations isolate them from the Government. For them the prime consideration is the welfare of our young people and what we can do for them, through the university.

I feel exactly the same way. There is a purpose here that should transcend politics.

The Vice Chancellor, Professor Rajesh Chandra, has also been to see me to share his thoughts. Naturally, there are a number of issues to resolve.

I have no doubt we can settle these to the considerable advantage of the university. We have made a start in discussions between university representatives and officials from the Ministry of Education.

A Cabinet sub-committee on education, chaired by the Minister of Education, has also met with the university management and founders. These consultations will continue under a new SDL Government!

Their broad purpose is to establish a legal framework for recognition of the university and its academic credentials and standards. More particularly, the university needs official accreditation to enable it to take students supported by Government scholarship and loan schemes.

In the last five years, we have substantially increased the allocations for PSC, FAB and multi-ethnic scholarships. For the multi-ethnic scholarship alone, my Government has spent more than \$18 million since we came into office in 2001. From this funding commitment, 4,512 students were given scholarships. But clearly, more assistance needs to be given as more and more of our students are succeeding in their secondary school studies to enter university and other tertiary institutions.

You can be assured that any future Government I lead will continue to provide additional scholarship funds for the university and tertiary education of students from all our communities.

An aspect of this project that appealed to me is the pledge to keep fees and charges affordable. Education is an expensive business and it can never be completely free. But all Governments have a responsibility to reduce costs wherever they can. During our first term, for instance, we have extended the tuition fee assistance scheme right through to Form Seven.

This means parents have been freed from paying all tuition fees for primary and secondary education for their children. Students have been exempted from fees for external examinations.

The Government has decided to pay the premiums for renewal of school leases on native land. Boarding school grants are now being paid to rural primary schools while building grants are available for urban boarding schools giving places to poor children from remote areas.

Ladies and gentlemen, what we are to celebrate is just the beginning. It is to be the start of a five-year plan to construct all the necessary buildings and infrastructure for the university. As the project gathers pace and support, a full-fledged campus will emerge, along with residential and commercial amenities in the surrounding area. There will be new jobs and businesses.

I am pleased to acknowledge the helpful attitude taken by the landowning mataqali in giving their consent through the NLTB for a site needed for the long term development of the campus.

I understand that two scholarships will be awarded annually to members of the mataqali.

When the University opened in March last year, I understand that it offered courses in accounting, economics, management, computing science, information technology, mathematics, language and literature.

Now, I am told that the university will soon offer teacher education, and postgraduate studies in English, economics and history and courses in Hindi and Fijian.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am much impressed with the university's goal of teaching entrepreneurship as a career. Those who qualify would thus become graduates creating jobs, rather than graduates looking for jobs. This will complement the efforts of the Government to create more small and medium enterprises that produce about 60 per cent of employment in most countries.

I commend the university's plans to co-ordinate its courses with the needs of the private sector, the main driver of our economic growth.

Like the Government, the university sees huge potential for information technology as a provider of jobs and export earnings. The university's high quality IT/computer science curriculum is based on that of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, a strategic partner.

There are four Centres of Excellence for public lectures and debate, research, writing and publishing. They are the Gandhi-Tappoo Centre for Peace Studies, Writing and Ethics; the Centre for International and Regional Affairs, the Centre for Diasporic Studies and the Centre for Indigenous Studies. The university is advancing well with building its international affiliations and professional networks.

I could speak at greater length about the many plans and ideas of the university's creators. But I think I have probably covered enough ground to provide a brief overview of what is involved here.

Let me now comment briefly on national reconciliation.

Reconciliation between our communities is essential for the country's progress. Fiji was badly wounded by what happened just over five years ago. I have consistently spoken of the need for forgiveness, healing, togetherness, trust and respect.

I see the face and image of reconciliation in the new university. I hear its voice in what I have been told by its founders. They are dedicated to fostering multi-cultural co-operation and understanding; that, too, will be part of the teaching here. They share our Government's vision of a strong, prosperous and peaceful society. That is something that surely can unite us all. My final comment concerns the actual purpose of this function – the dedication of the site for the university.

I offer these words of dedication:

May this university help Fiji on its journey of nationhood; may those who teach and study here follow the way of truth, love, righteousness and justice.

Thank you for listening. God Bless you all, and God bless Fiji.