

Re-Visiting Fiji¹

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We, Ansuiya and I, left Brisbane on October 12 2011 at 11:55 p.m., reaching Fiji on October 13 at 5:30 a.m. There were absolutely no signs of military intervention of December 2006: everything in the airport was managed by employees in civilian clothes. The unmistakable fragrance of the frangipani and the musical performance of the iTaukei quartet, as usual, welcomed the tourists; at least this practice hadn't changed. To my pleasant surprise, I found no armed soldiers at the entrance/exit gate of the airport, nor were there any road-blocks on the main road leading to our destination in Mountain View Estate. The military, I was told, was in the barracks, but kept a watchful eye on the law-and-order situation in the country, much to the relief of ordinary citizens. However, one feature of life in the country hadn't changed: fenced compounds with imposing gates. What I discovered was that although reduced to prisoners in their own gated enclosures, residents, guarded by their huge, ferocious-looking dogs, felt relatively more secure now against home invasions.

Early one morning, I volunteered to drive Ansuiya, Ajmer and Nir-mala to the Nadi Municipal Market. On the way, at the Namanu junction, I caught the sight of the ubiquitous North American yellow 'M' sign and realized that the ubiquitous MacDonald's had found its way to this country as well. Initially, I had difficulty adjusting to driving on the left-hand side of the road. No sooner did I make adjustments than a new problem showed up: the road from Mountain View, where we stayed, to Nadi Town was a honeycomb of pot-holes that challenged the driving skills of any driver. As I realized that zigzagging to avoid pot-holes was a futile exercise, I allowed the car to suffer some bumpy indignities as it rattled and squeaked ahead. In some places the narrow road was made narrower

still by the construction works left only half complete by the Town Council or the Public Works Department. Near the market, you had to be a skilled driver to negotiate buses, taxis, cars, vans, and trucks - all trying to turn into the main street. In this one-street town, all traffic must complete the run from the old-temple end to the new-temple end or vice versa to get out of the town, creating traffic jams and parking nightmares. Four rounds and forty-five minutes later, I, at last, found a parking spot. As soon as we entered the market, I found some noticeable reversal of situations: Fiji-Indians had out-numbered iTaukeis as fish vendors, while iTaukeis had out-numbered Fiji-Indians as vendors of roti-parcels. The iTaukeis appeared to be the main suppliers of vegetables, fruits, root-crops and kava, while the Fiji-Indians acted as middle-men and vendors. I interpreted this change to mean more active participation of the iTaukeis in the market economy of the country by transforming their subsistence *teitei* into bigger, cash-crop production units. This change, in my opinion, was the inevitable result of the Fiji-Indian farmers' land leases running out and their desire to move away from land-based occupation to 'land-free' means of earning their livelihood. I also learned that the fishing-licence fee received by the iTaukeis acted as a disincentive to their desire to be engaged in commercial fishing. For me, the future of the country was reflected in the market scene; it showed a glimpse of days to come; it was a fair microcosmic representation of what the country would look like in the future.

When you're a returning former citizen like me, you fall in love at first sight with all those things you can't get in your host-country. This is exactly what happened with me: what to buy, what not to buy to revitalize my roots, to re-live the memory of my days in this country caused a few anxious moments. I first picked the items like *bele* leaves, *daruka*, *na-ivi* nuts, *kathar* which I could not lay my hands on in Toronto. Then I just couldn't resist the temptation of buying ripe papayas, green pumpkin, red Fiji cowpeas, king pineapples, and a big *sabutu* fish, to name only a few items for consumption. I found Fiji cuisine irresistibly addictive in the sense that tastes developed here can be satisfied nowhere else in the world; to Fiji I had to return to satisfy my tastes in food. Although supermarkets sold imported red peppers at an exorbitant rate of \$39.00/ kg., local vegetables in municipal markets in the area were reasonably priced.

With our market purchases safely deposited in the trunk, we decided to move into the centre of the town's activities. Then we began the long process of window-shopping, shop-hopping in search for bargains for our children's presents. Here I realized that women are made of sterner stuff than their frail constitution would otherwise suggest: while Ansuiya and

¹ This extract is taken from Bhim Singh's recently published autobiography, *A Fractured Journey: The Memoirs of a Fiji-Indian* (2013)

Nirmala glided effortlessly from shop to women's-fashion shop, Ajmer and I trudged and limped behind them, exhausted by October heat and weariness. I noticed that the contents of the shops in the area had undergone noticeable changes. There were no exclusively duty-free shops with handicrafts and other exotic items prominently displayed, as you would find in the five-star hotels like the Natadola Beach Hotel or the Fijian Hotel. Most shops in the town had re-accommodated previously-discarded items now, catering to local *clientèle*. High-end shops like Tappoos stocked higher-priced saris to attract more affluent locals, while others with glittering fashion-ware on display, appealed to the local *clientèle's* sense of 'striking a deal, hitting a bargain, saving hard-earned money. There were shops that conspicuously displayed their sports goods, custom-ordered from China or Hong Kong, emblazoned with brand-name logos, the authenticity of which could neither be ascertained nor readily verified. This change in the contents of the shops, in my mind, could easily be associated with the result of economic lessons learned from the coups. Each time a coup took place – and there were four coups altogether – the country faced a debilitating drought in tourism for extended period of time. The merchants must have learned a simple economic lesson: diversify, don't put all your eggs in one basket. I discovered the prices in these shops depended on the status of the buyer. In the murky world of undeclared prices, tourists naturally paid the asking price, while the locals were allowed a discount, but you were still not sure what you should have actually paid. As a former citizen, I was put in a grey area: I was treated like a tourist with a local appearance to be exploited to the maximum degree. This is exactly what happened with me when I tried getting a dental bridge installed in place of a missing molar: the cost doubled as my return flight to Canada became clear to the dentist.

Life, to a large degree, had returned to normal with no interference in religious observances. I found there were no threats of *lovo*, no calls for repatriation; there were no violent demonstrations, no unbolting of prison floodgates. During our stay we found the whole country in the festive mood of Diwali; Diwali sales still remained as popular as they had always been.

With jet lag over, I began to review the major political events that had shaped the history of the country since the 1987 coups. I found this journey back in time unbearably painful with four coups in eighteen years – three in the name of iTaukei rights, one in the name of multiculturalism and social justice. The obvious thing that struck me was the exclusion of the Fiji-Indians and their contributions from Fiji's tourism-related literature. I said to myself in frustration, banishing the Fiji-Indians from the

tourist brochures can't banish the community from the country; nor can it ever take away an iota from the enormous sacrifices made by the *girmitiyas* and their descendants in giving the colony a firm, financial foundation. Not everything was perfect behind the picture-perfect *bula*-smiles and the hibiscus-in-the-hair image of the country: buried behind those smiles and flowers, as I had discovered, were hidden violence, ethnic hatred of the four coups – and all the atrocities that coups bring with them in their equipage. Yet, in spite of all these, I concluded, the Fiji-Indians seemed to be as much part of the country's landscape as the iTaukies.

I remembered that the ostensible objective of the first three coups had been to safeguard the interests of the iTaukies. From this point of view, they failed miserably, for the iTaukei interests had already been more than adequately safeguarded in the 1970 Constitution of the country, rendering the coups unnecessary, redundant. But more importantly for the perpetrators, the coups had achieved their hidden, un-stated objectives: persecuting the Fiji-Indians; subjecting them to political intimidation and harassment; creating a culture of violence and lawlessness in the country. The result has been a deeply divided, polarised nation, and the politics of ethnicity had created a state of suspicion, envy, and hatred between the ethnic groups. Yet, I quickly became aware that not everything was lost; there was a ray of hope: it was still possible to build bridges of tolerance, understanding, and mutual respect across the gulf. The present generation could, if it had the will, still leave a legacy of strength not of weakness, unity not of disunity, inclusion not of exclusion, nation-building not of tearing it apart. This constructive restoration obviously required serious thought and action.

One thought that troubled me was that Fiji's politics had placed undue emphasis on dissimilarities rather than on similarities, on exclusion rather than on inclusion, on dividing the communities rather than on uniting them. Subramani, in his 'No One is Purely One Thing Today' in *Altering Imagination*, has very succinctly summed up the situation in these words: 'The most unpleasant aspect of our Constitution is that it heightens ethnic barriers; instead of building bridges it fences off the communities into psychological ghettos.' I realized that what is needed in the future is group cohesion that can bind the communities with a sense of common purpose, common goal, common name, and common destiny. I found that the commonalities between the ethnic groups are many: for Indo-Fijians also Fiji has been their homeland, for they have known no other country, lived in no other place. Both the groups are nurtured here; both have tilled the same soil, have breathed the same air, have drunk from the same rivers and *yaqona* bowl, have dreamt the same dreams. A culture of brother-

hood, of peaceful co-existence, of live-and-let-live is to be consciously fostered. I honestly believed that confidence-building measures like the proposed cross-cultural studies in schools, human values, education, ethnically-neutral programs can contribute towards restoring love and respect. Both ethnic groups complement each other in many admirable ways and can build from each other's strength. Acres and acres of most fertile land, proven to have operated at optimum level of production in Fiji-Indian-tenant hands, lie fallow, after being reserved, bringing no economic benefits to the nation. This waste of natural resources, I felt, is to be addressed urgently; with the ownership of the land remaining intact, it has to be put to its optimum use in the interest of the country. Everybody has lost: the land owners have lost their rental income; the tenant-farmers have lost their means of livelihood; the nation has lost valuable foreign exchange. This is not the way Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, one of the national leaders with vision, saw the country developing.

I remembered that agonising period when the Chaudhry-government was held hostage for 56 days in the 2000-coup and the relations between the ethnic groups in the country descended to the lowest point, the situation had cried out for a genuine reconstruction-reconciliation effort by men and women of vision. We all know that no healing or reconciliation can ever take place unless both the parties, the sinners and those sinned against, have experienced a genuine change of heart, the former showing true sorrow over the misdeeds or wrongs, the latter willing to accept the apologies, forgive and move on. We also know that a half-hearted effort or paying lip-service to the apology-forgiveness process always turns counter-productive, doing more damage in the process as the aggrieved party sees it as adding insult to injury. Unfortunately, I found, this is where serious mistakes had been made. Lacking someone of Desmond Tutu's calibre in the country, the Qarase government made a mockery of the reconciliation process as it set out to play the ethnic game, to woo the majority iTaukies with two bills: the Promotion of Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill and the *Qoliqoli* Bill. The first bill, slated to heal the wounds of three coups, failed to pass the litmus-test of genuine reconciliation, for it had made the granting of amnesty to all those 2000-coup perpetrators, convicted or awaiting convictions, a pre-requisite to any victim compensation. Like the critics of the Bill, I had also perceived it as being soft on the former, hard on the latter. The second bill had been aimed at pleasing all iTaukies by transferring ownership of all government-owned coastal areas, from the high watermarks to the 12-mile international limit, to the iTaukei clans that claim *qoliqoli* (fishing) rights of the areas. The country's Vice-President, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, a former

High Court judge, had expressed his uneasiness with the privatization of national assets. I felt Evanson of the Turtle Island Resort had voiced the thoughts of right-thinking people when he advised the government against this transfer, potentially valued at untold billions of dollars: 'It would be the first time any country has considered such proprietary rights, transfers of state assets to indigenous people...it must be seen as being contrary to the best interests of the tourism industry and the nation.' Yet, relentlessly, the government had zeroed in on what saner heads saw as a 'no-go' zone.

Though the Qarase-government had won the 2006 elections (amid rumours of vote rigging), I regarded it as having drifted away from its mandate of providing clean, transparent governance to the nation as a whole; it had too closely aligned itself with the interests of the majority iTaukies at the expense of others. To preserve the multi-cultural fabric of the country, a 'clean-up' step had to be taken, 'a train...rushing towards a racial chasm' had to be derailed, to prevent the runaway agenda of the government from becoming laws, so the military thinking went. To me, those who see this intervention purely in black-and-white terms of neutralising a democratically-elected government fail to understand the multi-layered complexities of the troubled nation. Declaring he would have done 'exactly what the army commander did,' President Iloilo had openly declared his support for the army commander's action in the interest of the nation as opposed to the interest of an ethnic group: 'I fully endorse the actions of the commander in acting in the interest of the nation (removing the Qarase government.)'

The first thought that came to my mind was that the country's tumultuous past, history, could act as her saviour now. I realized that in the historian's account of events, a constant, an unchanging past, is suggested to act as an effective backdrop against which future events could be judged. History, in this sense, is an interconnected sequence of events, with the past as much alive in the present as the present will be in the future. Every point in the past represented many possibilities, many choices, many might-have-beens or could-have-beens that were never explored, many doors to the rose-gardens never opened. To me, the past is an infinite reservoir of wisdom; it is a mirror for magistrates, a guide for the leaders, a reference point to be used by the present generation to salvage the future. I found what is needed is the will to re-visit the past to direct the future. Avoiding the pitfalls in the future, I felt, is the lesson humanity learns from the past and that if to err is a human frailty, to learn from the error is the greatest human strength. Then I recollected that T. S. Eliot in his essay 'Tradition' suggests that we should use our mind to find 'what in the

past is worth preserving and what should be rejected; and what conditions, within our power to bring about, would foster the society that we desire.' It greatly pleased me that 'A People's Charter for Change and Progress' proposes the right move to change the country into a 'non-racial' democratic nation.

I am of the opinion that the quality of the country's future depends on the quality of her present: if she takes care of the present, the future will take care of itself. Only then the country can build the type of society she desires in the future. Here, deeds must speak louder than words. From this point of view, the political process must never be allowed to undo what the judicial process deems proper in the crime-punishment context, for the criminal behaviour mustn't be allowed to go unpunished. The judiciary must retain its independent, impartial, disinterested nature; it must be – and seen to be – above reproach: it must allow itself to be judged by the same laws it uses to judge others in order to be above political interference. To take the country positively forward, it is incumbent on the present generation to ensure the creation of a just and caring society, a society governed by the rules of decent human behaviour, a society in which the hydra-headed ethnic hatred is crushed for ever. Tough laws, in my view, should be enacted against the perpetrators of hate-crime, inciters of ethnic hatred, preachers of extremist ideology, users of inflammatory speeches; however, what is more important is giving real bite to these 'paper tigers' by ensuring the laws are enforced to the fullest extent. In the eyes of the law, everybody should be equal: no one above it, no one more equal than others. Violence and emotional outbursts must give way to non-violence and reasoned restraint. This is where, I felt, the Fiji-Indians had saved the country from bloodbaths. They wouldn't match violence with violence, for violence against violence tends to glorify violence as a tool for wild, vigilante justice. This is the one vital lesson the present generation has to learn: violence begets violence, hate begets hate, but love begets love. When politics of goodwill and love replaces the politics of violence and hate, all wounds, no matter how deep, will heal automatically.

Happy with the renewed awareness of our mother country's past and our new-found expectations for her future, we, Ansuiya and I, decided to visit different places and talk to different people to re-discover our roots there and to find out how the country was using her present to direct her future.

The first person I decided to meet was Subramani who had kindly agreed to edit the manuscript of my autobiography. He was stationed at the Namaka campus of Fiji National University. I located Subramani in

his office on the second floor of the main building. I was very excited to be informed that the government had already taken bold decisions on two important subjects: a common name for all citizens of the country and dual citizenship for former citizens. I discovered that on June 30 2010, the cabinet approved the use of the term 'Fijian' as the common name for all Fiji citizens, while the term 'iTaukei' was to be used to distinguish the indigenous citizens from the others. There is a move away from compartmentalizing the communities into different 'races'; it is necessary, Subramani told me, to use more appropriate terms like 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic groups' instead of politically dated terminology of race.

On this visit I was glad to see that my motherland had gone miles to improve ethnic relations by removing her 'blinkered ethnic vision', by becoming open and inclusive in treating her former citizens equally without fear. I regard the concept of dual citizenship as a positive step on the part of the government in trying to tap into the large resource of the country's diaspora living in other countries, in trying to make them feel wanted in the process of her development by offering them all the privileges of Fiji citizens, including the right to invest and work. For Fiji, the benefits of dual citizens are many, including the vital role her diaspora can play in establishing business links at home and abroad to facilitate free in-flow of foreign capital, technology and business know-how. In one move, the home-country has shown that she is on her way to becoming open, tolerant, and inclusive in following the footsteps of the fastest growing economies like China and India. With dual citizenship, she is enabling her diasporas in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States to 'speed the flow of information across borders', and to 'create connections that help people with good ideas collaborate with each other, both within and across ethnicities', to quote *The Economist* (November 19–25, 2011). One moving example of how help is coming from her diasporas in Australia and New Zealand is seen in the medical field. Dr. Umanand Prasad, a graduate from the Fiji School of Medicine who later completed his M.B.B.S. from India, migrated to Australia and established a successful medical practice in Adelaide some thirty years ago. He donated one million dollars to the University of Fiji in Saweni, Lautoka, to finance a medical school there and to provide his service as Dean of the Umanand Prasad School of Medicine which opened its doors to medical students in 2009. Another example is the Viseisei Sai Health Centre founded by Dr. Rajat Gyaneshwar that is providing free medical services. Commending the two former Fiji doctors for their initiative to provide the medical services, Dr. Neil Sharma, Fiji's Minister for Health, said at the opening ceremony, 'Return migration brings expertise, professional and financial re-

sources, and fresh ideas that help contribute to economic growth.' The Sathya Sai Service Organization from Australia has been holding medical camps in Fiji for some years now. The camps are now held at the Uman and School of Medicine where neurological services are provided. Under the auspices of the Sai Medical Unit, a plan has been put forward to the Fiji-Australian Association in Canberra which has promised total assistance for three members of the team for two-week stays for a period of three years. Training for surgeons, registrars, and nurses in Canberra is also being looked into to facilitate neurological medicine in Fiji. In my opinion, the country is moving in the right direction with its new policies, for that's the way the world is moving, and Fiji must move with the flow, not against it. Extending dual citizenship to the country's former citizens living abroad has been one sure way of tapping into this vast resource.

I discovered that another important step taken by the government is to move away from the 'politics of race' exploited by the colonial government and those that followed it, to the utter destruction of the country's multicultural fabric: 'A People's Charter for Change and Progress,' proposes the right move 'to rebuild Fiji into a non-racial, culturally-vibrant and united, well-governed, truly democratic nation that seeks progress and prosperity through merit-based equality of opportunity and peace.' In this new Fiji, I was happy to note, 'society as a whole will need to place the national interest ahead of any personal and sectional interests.' This is something new, something worth achieving, for, in my view, it has the potential of forging a nation out of her disparate entities, of rising above the politics of ethnicity that has been the country's greatest tragedy. Then, in my view, the Fiji-Indians won't ask how the country can give them protection, but how, through pro-active actions, they will give political support to the country; the iTaukies won't ask how the country will give them special privileges but how, through pro-active economic ventures, they will give material support to the country.

I was happy to note that although the idea of the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption reporting directly to the President, a brain-child of Dr. Bavadra, the Coalition Prime Minister, and Sir Penaia Ganilau, the President, was started in 1987 to investigate corruption in the government to ensure transparency and accountability, it was finally established by the present government on April 4 2007. Once again, taking decisive actions, as opposed to paying lip service to proposals, has been the hallmark of the present government. The objective, I noted, was to ensure that the people of Fiji live a life free of corruption by strengthening the will of the government to fight corruption, the public sector to deliver services honestly, the private sector to carry out their business ethically,

and the citizens not to tolerate corrupt or unethical practices. In my view, the Commission's emphasis on leading by example is a very good idea of setting the tone at the top; equally commendable is the idea of giving protection to the whistle-blowers to encourage ordinary citizens' participation in rooting out, what morally-upright people call, 'the cancer of society.'

I welcomed the military Commander Frank Bainimarama's promise of lifting the emergency on January 7, as reported in *The Economist* (January 7–13 2012), as another step in the right direction of returning the country to democratic rule. This is consistent with what he promised in July 2009 that consultations on the new constitution would take place in 2012 and the elections will be held in 2014. To back his words with actions, Prime Minister Bainimarama has begun taking necessary steps required for the elections. Reporting on January 23, *Fijilive* quoted Attorney General Sayed Aiyaz Khaiyum as saying that, to get the country ready, the government has already chosen Canada's CODE Inc. based in Ottawa because of 'its experience, accuracy and transparency in assisting developing nations with logistically challenging terrains... For the first time in Fiji's history the 2014 elections will feature true universal suffrage – one person, one vote, one value – and it is critical we get it right,' Furthermore, as reported by the *Fiji Times* of March 10, 2012, Prime Minister Bainimarama has charted the route to the return to democracy by announcing the details of the Constitution Commission and the specific time-line the process is to follow. With these preparations already in the works, and Canada's CODE Inc. bringing Canadian standards of fair, free and transparent elections, I'm confident that, like the common name and dual citizenship, this process of returning the country to democracy will be taken to its natural conclusion to the satisfaction of national and global community.

Above all, Prime Minister Bainimarama's 'Happy Fiji Day' message on October 10 2012, one of the best I've read, happily convinced me that the country had been set on the right course for re-discovering her lost status as 'a symbol of hope' for the world:

Fiji Day...is the day we set aside to reflect on our country, what it means to us and the pride we take in its achievements. It is a day for celebration, to join our hands and commemorate the things that bind us together. It is also a wonderful opportunity to reflect on our past, our present and our future. At Independence 42 years ago today, we dedicated ourselves to building a strong nation. Despite challenges, we have never abandoned our dream to finally achieve our goals. And, my fellow Fijians,

think about how far we have already come. But it is the future that is truly exciting. As a nation, collectively, we dream of a Fiji that is strengthened by the unity of all her citizens: one people, one nation.

We believe in a Fiji that respects and cherishes all the strands of its many cultures, traditions and histories. We argue that a common and equal citizenry is the only foundation upon which a modern, democratic Fiji can rest. And we commit ourselves to leaving behind a better Fiji for our children. So, as we celebrate today, I ask that we pause for a moment to reflect on what the country that we all call home means to us, to our friends, and to our families, and what each of us can do to help build a better Fiji for all.

And, for me, this genuine attempt at reconciliation and nation building is the critical still point in my narrative where:

both my diverging roads merge,
both the strands of my narrative end,
both my routes to roots converge,
and both my journeys of discovery end.