

Children of the Indus, 1879-2004: A Review

Brij V. Lal

The 125th anniversary of the arrival of Indian people in Fiji was marked by acrimony as rival Indo-Fijian groups competed to claim the 'legitimate' ownership of the legacy of *girit*. The two principal antagonists were the sometimes moribund Fiji Girit Council, formed in 1979 on the occasion of the centenary of *girit*, and the National Farmers Union which emerged on the scene in the 1990s. Rival parades, magazines, public announcements and web sites contributed to a depressing sense of disarray and bickering in the community, reflecting perhaps the deeper anxieties and disagreements that beset the Indo-Fijian people. The contrast with the atmosphere in 1979 could not have been greater, when a distinguished national multiracial committee chaired by high chief and deputy prime minister, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, organised a three-day celebration to mark the centenary of *girit*. In 2004, riding the wave of indigenous nationalism, the government was aloof and indifferent, apart from making a few stray feel-good statements about multiculturalism and reconciliation. The lone exception to this among non-Indo-Fijians was Ratu Epeli Ganilau, then chair of the Great Council of Chiefs, who apologised on behalf of his people for the deliberate or inadvertent harm his people had caused the Indo-Fijian community over the last hundred years, but especially since the coups of 1987. For that and similar reconciliatory gestures, Ratu Epeli was dumped as chair of the Council of Chiefs. Such is the reality of public life and public discourse in today's frayed Fiji.

One good to come out of the celebrations was the publication or republication of a number of books and monographs on various aspects of the Indo-Fijian experience (Naidu, 2004, Lal, 2004, Lal, 2004b, Ali, 2004, Prasad, 2004). The *Children of Indus* is among them, though in intent and scope it differs from the others in significant ways. Whereas the other accounts are (or try to be) scholarly in nature, or attempt to convey the truth and reality of the Indo-Fijian experience in inclusive, nuanced

ways, *Children of Indus* is an overt piece of political propaganda even though its subtitle is 'A history of Indians in Fiji portraying the struggles of an immigrant community for justice, equality and acceptance.' It is a journalistic account whose primary purpose is to accentuate the role of the anti-Federation tradition in Indo-Fijian politics. In the early parts of the book, the role of the Kisan Sangh is fore-grounded in the sugar cane farmers' struggle against the Colonial Sugar Refining Company and in the latter half, the heroic, self-sacrificing role of Mahendra Chaudhry and his Labour-Party aligned National Farmers Union.

It would be cruel to subject a book such as this to normal scholarly scrutiny: it is full of elementary errors (KL Gillion, for example, not KD Gillion, quotations are not sourced, minor figures of no significance in the larger perspective of history are accorded heroic roles). But what does trouble me is the deliberate distortion of facts, a startling ignorance of basic published literature that would be on the standard reading list of any undergraduate course in Fijian history, a simple-minded and simplistic acceptance of views which conform a particular prejudice but which are contested and problematised in scholarly accounts. It is as if the author is saying, 'My mind us made up. Don't confuse me with facts.' There are too many of these in the book to single all of them out in a short review. What I would like to do is to mention just one to indicate the larger problem of interpretation and analysis so as to warn the reader not to take at face value what is presented here in the guise of objective history, and to register my alarm at the way in which history is manipulated to serve a narrow, partisan political position.

The best illustration of distortion occurs in the discussion surrounding the formation of the Kisan Sangh in the late 1930s. This was an important initiative in the organisation of farmers, undertaken in the most difficult of circumstances. But after a few years, the association ran into trouble. According to the book – there is no author although the writer's identity is not difficult to ascertain – the main culprit was AD Patel and his spiritual confidante, Swami Rudrananda, who cleverly split the farmers to shore up his political position among them. Patel is the villain in the piece here as he is alleged to have been in most of the major events in Indo-Fijian history narrated in the book – the 1960 sugar strike, the debate on land tenure, the move towards independence. Much of the anti-Patel ammunition on sugar matters deployed in the book comes from Ajodhya Prasad's self-exculpatory, deeply contested account of the Kisan Sangh. Prasad was Patel's bitter, life-long political opponent, and therefore no reliable source for assessing Patel's character or motivation.

It is true that Patel was instrumental in forming the rival Maha Sangh, but this outcome was the *consequence* rather than the *cause* of the divisions raking the sugar farming community. Kisan Sangh's own cosy relationship with the CSR dismayed many who then flocked to Patel. But Patel was not the only major Indian leader not to join the Kisan Sangh. SB Patel, Vishnu Deo, Said Hasan were among those who kept their distance. But even those who had joined the Kisan Sangh earlier turned against it. Among them was Chattur Singh, who is portrayed as minor hero in the book, not least for defeating Patel in the 1937 elections. Singh wrote to the Governor on 16 July 1940, before the formation of the Maha Sangh, about the 'harmful' activities of the Kisan Sangh, and seeking to 'have the Kisan Sangh declared an unlawful association for the duration of the war. It is worth pondering why Singh wrote what he did? Sadanand Maharaj, son of Badri Maharaj, similarly told the Governor on 22 May 1939 that he had doubts about the activities of the Kisan Sangh, but had joined it to caution moderation. Maharaj had an agenda of his own though: he wanted to be appointed a Justice of the Peace. Blaming Patel for the problems besetting the Indo-Fijian community may pay the National Farmers Union some political dividend in the short term, but it doesn't do its reputation any good.

In another publication, *Girmitiya*, sponsored by the National Farmers Union and, apparently, compiled by the same person who wrote the *Children of Indus*, gross examples of plagiarism occur. The diagram on the system of recruitment of *girmitiyas* in India on p.27 is lifted straight from my book *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: 1983, p. 21). The diagram is credited to the National Archives of Fiji, when it is patently my work, which the author, for reasons best known to herself, is unable to acknowledge. The map showing the regional origins of the *girmitiyas* on p. 30 is lifted straight from my book, p. 49, though neither the book nor anything else I have written on the history of the Indo-Fijians is acknowledged either in this book or in *Children of Indus*. The map on p. 31 (including the caption) and another on p.32 showing the geographical distribution of *girmitiyas* in Fiji are lifted from K.L. Gillion's *Fiji's Indian Migrants: A history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne, 2nd printing, 1973, pp. 202 and 205), but strangely credited to the National Archives of Fiji. Such sloppy dishonesty is silly and so unnecessary.

I might note parenthetically that a rival publication to the *Girmitiyas*, *Girmit's Greatest Gift: 125 years of service to Fiji*, published by the Fiji Girmit Council, also attempts through photographs and stories to remember the Indo-Fijian experience. Some of the material is valuable, but

the whole publication is marred by a text full of grammatical and typographical errors and carelessness. The piece on AD Patel (p.131), supposedly reprinted from my biography of him (*A Vision for Change: AD Patel and the Politics of Fiji*: Canberra: National Centre for Development Studies, 1997), is gobbledegook. And a piece by me is not the one I sent but my introduction to another book, *BitterSweet*, complete with acknowledgement to people who helped me accomplish that project! Such lapses are embarrassing both to the authors and to the readers.

I would not have bothered commenting on *Children of Indus* and these two other publications but for the fact that they are widely marketed in Fiji and elsewhere as an authentic account of the historical experience of the Indo-Fijian community. In scholarship, there is always room for debate and discussion: there can be no closure or finality in matters of interpretation. But a work as deeply flawed as these are of little use to anyone. Worse, they do grave injustice to the complex history of Fiji's Indian community. They deserve better.

References

- Ali, Ahmed (2004) *Girmit: The Indenture Experience in Fiji*. Suva: Ministry of Reconciliation and Multi-Ethnic Affairs.
- Lal, Brij V. (2004) *Girmitiyas: The origins of the Fiji Indians*. Lautoka: FIAS.
- Lal, Brij V. (ed) (2004b) *BitterSweet: The Indo-Fijian Experience*. Canberra: Pandanus Books.
- Naidu, V. (2004) *Violence of Indenture*. Lautoka: Fiji Institute of Applied Studies.
- National Farmers Union (2004) *Children of the Indus, 1879-2004*. Suva: National Farmers Union.
- Prasad, Rajendra (2004) *Tears in Paradise*. Auckland: Glade Publishers.

Author:

Brij V. Lal is Professor of Pacific and Asian History at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. Email: brijvilash@gmail.com