

**Making and Unmaking of a Fijian Colossus:  
A Review Essay of *Tuimacilai: A Life of Ratu  
Sir Kamisese Mara*<sup>1</sup>**

Brij V. Lal

Ratu Sir Kamisese Kapawai Tuimacilai Mara was the pre-eminent Fijian leader of his generation. By virtue of training and temperament, instinct and intellect, and charisma and cunning, he stood head and shoulders over his other Fijian contemporaries, both literally as well as metaphorically. He became Fiji's first Chief Minister in 1966 and Prime Minister at independence in 1970, an office which he occupied continuously until his defeat in 1987 at the hands of the newly-formed National Federation Party-Fiji Labour Party Coalition. This month-long experiment in multiracial governance was overthrown in a military coup in May of that year, leading a short while later to Ratu Mara's return as the head of an interim administration for five years until 1992. Upon the death of Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau in 1993, Ratu Mara became the President of the Republic of Fiji until he was removed from office by the military who were struggling to contain the insurgency unleashed by George Speight in May 2000. After a prolonged stroke-related ailment, Ratu Mara died in 2004.

Ratu Mara's life in outline and his various official attainments are widely known and celebrated in Fiji. In 1977, he published a selection of his speeches that spoke to his catholic interests and tastes. They exuded optimism and hope and promise: the early 1970s were golden years for the Fijian leader, secure in office at home and lauded internationally for his championship of multiracial democracy. In 1997 came his memoir, *The Pacific Way*, written with the assistance of his long time friend and aide, Sir Robert Sanders, and published by the University of Hawaii Press. Delightful in parts, accessibly written and still very much worth reading, the book provided tantalizing glimpses into Ratu Mara's life, his

childhood, education in Fiji, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, early career in the colonial administration with all its frustrations and opportunities, his political evolution and international experience, portraits of people with whom he had worked or clashed, the major events of post-colonial Fiji. I say tantalizing because the book is brief and important episodes and events of great significance were left unexplored, crying out for deeper analysis and reflection, especially his own role in them. But it was a memoir after all, a warm, guarded synopsis rather than a critical exploration.

Five years after his death a substantial biography has appeared. The author of *Tuimacilai* is retired Canberra-based English-born historian of the Pacific islands, Deryck Scarr. *Tuimacilai* addresses some of the points omitted in the earlier account, and provides more information, though not necessarily more or better insights, into the major controversies of the Fijian leader's career. On paper, Scarr is eminently qualified to write this book. He began his academic career at the Australian National University in the early 1960s as a scholar of British colonial policy and practice in the Pacific, moving on to write a two-volume biography of the colonial governor, Sir John Bates Thurston. In 1980 he published a commissioned biography of the Fijian leader Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna after Peter France, the author of the impressively eloquent *Charter of the Land: Custom and colonisation in Fiji* (1969) was found to be unavailable. Scarr followed this up with a disturbingly sympathetic account of the military coup of 1987. The events of that tumultuous year found Deryck Scarr quite in his element, celebrating what appeared on surface to be the triumph of indigenous nationalism over the ambitions and aspirations of an immigrant community. The victory turned out to be pyrrhic, much to the dismay of those who were in the coup corner in 1987.

An obvious strength of this biography of Mara is that all of Scarr's previous scholarship is brought to bear on it. It is, in an important sense, the capstone of Scarr's career as a scholar of Fiji. The book is based on archival research and press reports of events, parliamentary proceedings and occasional conversations with people in Fiji. But the author seems to have had only one sustained conversation with the subject, in September 1978, in connection probably with the Sukuna book. There were, must have been, chance encounters later on, but nothing related to the subject of this book. So Scarr resorts to such phrases as 'or so he might have thought,' or 'as it seemed to him,' 'he could be only very broadly amused,' (312), or 'This could be a bit amusing to Ratu Mara' (310). The reader might want to know what Ratu Mara himself thought about a particular issue or problem, not Scarr's rough approximation without making

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<sup>1</sup> By Deryck Scarr. Adelaide: Crawford House Publishing, 2008.x+414. ISBN: 9781863333283 9pbk).

his own (Scarr's) intervention clear. Having talked to scores of people in Fiji in the course of my own research over the past two decades, including with people who knew Ratu Mara as a friend of a political colleague, I have good reason to be sceptical of Scarr's intimate knowledge of his subject. In a curious kind of way, we learn more about what the author thinks than about the subject of the biography. This is very much a life as seen through a particular ideological and political lens, as most such projects are wont to be. Yet a clear articulation of the author's own position would have enabled the reader to better understand the context and background to the book. It is clearly partial in both senses of the word.

During his time in the academy, Scarr was widely and accurately known as a productive scholar of original research and acerbic and unequivocal judgements. He was also widely and accurately regarded as a writer of Delphic prose, a difficult read. I have encountered dozens of people in Fiji shaking their heads in bewildered frustration at their inability to enter the text, and giving up altogether. This is a pity, but one cannot blame them either: the prose is dense. Just one example will suffice to illustrate the point: 'For with some little experience of its own, the Colonial Office had been particularly impressed by Cakobau's Government under JB Thurston, who took New Zealand with its heavy white settlement, land spoliation and race-war as the example to be avoided; and during debates on annexation in the House of Commons, Prime Minister WE Gladstone himself was actually being charitable in merely describing as "sadly deluded" the contrasting philosophy of Member of Parliament and South Sea merchant William McArthur, with his ongoing motions for annexation, his admiringly supportive Methodist connections in Fiji, his false humanitarian propaganda, his company's undeclared investments there and, shortly, this company's secret labour recruiting for its illegally-obtained plantations in Samoa' (18).

Imagine a senior high school or even a university student in Fiji, with English as a second or third language, trying to make some sense of this sort of amazing convolution. That leads to a larger question: for whom is the book being written? This question is pertinent because the Qarase government was reported in the press as having provided funds to help defray the cost of Scarr's research. I have no doubt that Scarr fancies himself as a fine prose stylist, but I am attracted to the words of Primo Levi who writes: 'He who does not know how to communicate, or communicates badly, in a code that belongs only to him or a few others, is unhappy, and spreads unhappiness around him. If he communicates badly deliberately, he is wicked or at least a discourteous person, because he imposes labour, anguish, or boredom on his readers.'

Orotundity though is not the only problem. The book will not be accessible to anyone without a deep knowledge of late 20<sup>th</sup> century Fiji. There is very little attempt to provide context and background accessibly to enable the reader to make some sense of the narrative. As one reader has told me, Scarr is writing as if he is talking to members of a Ratu Mara Fan Club, who already know the main characters and the main plot. A poor newcomer will have no idea what is happening. There is also a great deal of shadow-boxing, with Scarr taking pot shots at people whose views he dislikes or disagrees with, but who are not directly identified, leaving the bulk of the readership puzzled about the tone and temperature of the prose.

People whose views Scarr dislikes are mercilessly pilloried. There is much carping about the people at the University of the South Pacific (192), for instance, while Colonial Secretary Paddy Macdonald, who showed an occasional independence of mind, is 'urgently thrusting,' 'ambitious': ambitious for what? That distinguished humanist and author of the great and prophetic report about the economic problems of indigenous Fijians, OHK Spate, is described simply and dismissively as a 'visiting geographer' (68). Adi Kuini Bavadra is 'campus-inspired and regarding herself as a political mind' (311). Scarr reports Mara laughing at RD Patel 'which it was often very easy and sometimes for sanity's sake almost essential to do' (145). I doubt if Mara felt that way. He had a certain charm and grace despite well known bouts of anger. Writing on the 1965 constitutional conference, Scarr says that 'It enabled communal academics of the coming generation to misrepresent Indians as victims of premeditated rape' (140). The reader is not told which academics so that a proper assessment could be made of this contention. Yet not only 'communal' Indian academics but distinguished independent advisors to the Commonwealth and Foreign Office, such as Professor Stanley de Smith, also thought the outcome of the conference unfair with its excessively communal character and overrepresentation of Europeans.

Deryck Scarr is a narrative historian, as indeed are most practitioners of Pacific islands history. But Scarr's style prevents him from making things plain or signposting major turning points in the unfolding drama. A couple of examples will illustrate the point. The Ratu Mara of the late 1960s and early 1970s was very different from the Mara of the late 1970s and 1980s. In the earlier phase of his career, he genuinely appeared to be committed to a multiracialist vision for Fiji, which is why he was able to attract very substantial support from non-Fijian communities. But that multiracial base had disappeared in the second phase of his career. How did this come to pass? Why did virtually all the leading lights

of the Indian Alliance, for example, decamp to the NFP and later to the Fiji Labour Party? The reason simply is the results of the April 1977 elections in which the Alliance Party lost power because Sakeasi Butadroka drew nearly a quarter of the communal Fijian voters. Ratu Mara had been told by David Butler of Nuffield College, Oxford, that the Alliance would remain in power as long as Fijians were united. But division among his people caused Mara to put his multiracial platform on hold, and it remained there till the end. Mara's primary concern was the unity of his people over and above a multiracial vision and though there is some evidence of that in this book, it is obscured.

From the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, Mara was learning the ropes in colonial administration. While officials in Fiji and London found him on occasion difficult to deal with and he might support election of Fijian representatives to the Legislative Council over the objection of other chiefs, his commitment to the Fijian cause was never in doubt. In the late 1950s, he caused a minor tremor in London when he said that he had been told by Ratu Sukuna that there was a document which promised the paramountcy of Fijian interests. No such document was ever found and people like Sir Ronald Garvey, who was consulted, doubted its existence. In 1963, Mara was a signatory to the Wakaya Letter which, for the first time, outlined the Fijian preconditions for independence, coming close in spirit if not in words to what latter-day Fijian nationalists demanded. But after the 1965 constitutional conference, at the explicit urging of Governor Sir Derek Jakeway, a different Mara enters the public stage: an outwardly more multiracialist leader of an avowedly multiracial Alliance Party. And it is in this phase that he takes Fiji to independence. How deep was the transformation, it is difficult to say, and Scarr does not help.

Nor does he help much with what Ratu Mara knew or did not know about the making of the 1987 coup. At the time, Mara vehemently denied any foreknowledge, defending his participation in the post-coup administration on the grounds that his metaphorical house was on fire and he could not afford the luxury of standing on the sidelines seeing his life's work undone before his eyes. Perhaps it was really as simple as that, perhaps it was not. Scarr has himself written in the past that Ratu Finau Mara was sent to Sigatoka to warn his father about the impending event. Did he tell his father? Was Ratu Finau ever asked about it? At the time, Rabuka claimed that he was carrying out God's mission in executing the coup, absolving everyone from blame. But in the 1990s, he pointed an accusing finger at others, including Ratu Mara, saying that he was made the 'Fall Guy' who refused to fall. Rabuka once told me that he would one day like to write a book titled the 'Kleenex Man' for the way he was used and dis-

carded by those who wanted the Coalition government toppled. People instrumental in staging the 1987 coup are still around, and they all have interesting stories to tell. Scarr has missed a great opportunity to shed further light on this murky episode. We are no wiser about Ratu Mara's role in the 1987 coup than we were two decades ago.

Another controversial episode of the 1980s goes unanalysed. Soon after the closely contested 1982 general elections, Ratu Mara went to Sydney and there told the Australian journalist Stuart Inder that the Russians had secretly funnelled one million dollars to the opposition National Federation Party to depose him from power because he stood in the way of Russia's expansionist ambitions in the South Pacific. The claim was investigated by a Royal Commission headed by New Zealand retired judge Sir John White. Interestingly, Mara disclosed no evidence for his allegation, claiming Crown Privilege. In Scarr's view, Mara took this path 'to protect sources from exposure' as 'there were credible sources in Australia that Ratu Mara could not name without identifying them' (269). I have my very grave doubts. Not providing evidence after impugning the character of the Opposition through the accusation of treason seems strange. Most people in Fiji believe that there was no evidence to provide in the first place. I believe Ratu Mara made the allegation knowing from the very beginning that he could get away with the plea of Crown Privilege, and that the tactic was probably masterminded by the Alliance Attorney General Sir John Falvey and Alliance functionary Leonard Usher. But if that is not the case, his biographer should have investigated what remains one of the lowest points in Ratu Mara's political career.

The 1990s was a decade of fundamental political transformation in Fiji. A new and exclusively Fijian political party, the *Sogosoqo Vakavulewa ni Taukei*, was launched under the leadership of Sitiveni Rabuka, only to be challenged and eventually undermined by people such as Josefata Kamikamica and by political parties, such as the Fijian Association, quietly backed by Mara. The 'cold war' between Mara and Rabuka was public knowledge and a key story of the early-mid-1990s, but there is not much here on that beyond bland generalisations familiar to most students of Fijian politics. In Fiji many believe that Mara had a hand in Rabuka's 1999 downfall. After all, his own daughter was in the opposition camp, but again Scarr tells us little. A racially lopsided 1990 constitution was successfully reviewed and replaced by another more multiracial one but Mara's thoughts remain unexplored beyond words gleaned from newspaper reports. I know for a fact that Mara had strong opinions about what an appropriate constitution for Fiji should be. Privately he supported Fiji's return to the 1966 constitution, with communal and cross-voting seats and

two extra seats for Fijians. He had little time for Mahendra Chaudhry in the early 1990s, telling journalist Joe Nata in 1993 that the two could never be friends from the very beginning, but with his daughter in Chaudhry's cabinet, Mara praised his former adversary as having the potential to become Fiji's best prime minister. Mara's well known dynastic ambitions remain unexplored. Was that the reason he backed Chaudhry? Was that one of the reasons for his displeasure with Rabuka who stood in the way and refused to step aside? These are important questions for Mara's biographer to consider.

In a work of biography, it is understandable if the subject's critics and opponents get short shrift, but here Scarr is not so much dismissive as openly antagonistic. AD Patel, the great Indo-Fijian leader and the unheralded father of Fiji's independence movement, comes in for a torrid time. Patel came to Fiji as he would have been unwelcome in India because his wife was an English divorcee, writes Scarr (3), but has this anything to do with the man's record of political struggle for equality and justice in Fiji? Patels 'rank about half way down the Gujarati hierarchy,' he writes (137), only to reveal his ignorance about the actual social structure of rural Gujarati society where Patels, in fact, rule the roost even though theoretically they are middle ranking. There are few higher in social status in Gujarat than the Charotari Patels of the Kheda District, of whom AD was one (and SB Patel another). The two most famous Gujaratis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not Brahmins: Mahatma Gandhi was a Bania (trader) and Vallabhbhai [not Vallabhai] was a Pattidar [Patel]. Patel is accused of being a 'brilliant advocate on an easy wicket but a bad negotiator' (118), of practising 'mere eloquence' before the Eve Commission in 1961. Is there a touch of envy here? Patel is described as 'confessedly slavish follower of the Indian National Congress' (58). The worst is believed about the man. 'A good lawyer but a lousy politician,' Scarr approvingly quotes Apisai Tora about Patel (4). Anyone who knows Fijian politics knows that Tora, with his unparalleled record of party-switching and extreme and opportunistic nationalism, one of the founders of the Taukei Movement, is not the best judge of character. Tora was once a member of the NFP founded by AD Patel.

Elsewhere, ex-NFP member and political turncoat Surendra Prasad is brought in to support Scarr's anti-Federation tirade. Trafford Smith's untenable but self-exculpatory private comments about the performance of Federation leaders at the 1965 conference are used against Patel when in truth it was the UK delegation that mishandled the conference to orchestrate a pre-determined outcome as the official records so clearly show. Jai Ram Reddy, the leader of the NFP in the 1980s and 1990s simi-

larly becomes the target of Scarr's scatter-gun attack. He quotes Prasad (234) again that 'Jai Ram Reddy was anyway the tool of businessmen who had joined the Federation to protect the shopkeepers against the farmers.' Statements such as this discount the value of Scarr's book, which says more about the author himself than the objects of attack.

I do not have space here to catalogue Scarr's mis-judgments and misleading generalisations but will list a few to illustrate my point. On page 109, he writes that 'At hospitable dinner tables in the hills around Ba where this complaint [that the colonial establishment and the *Fiji Times* did not understand Indians] there might be priests and school teachers imported from India for the ongoing Indian National Congress word.' This is grossly insulting to those humble priests and dedicated teachers, usually affiliated with the Ramakrishna [not Rama Krishna] Mission, who gave their lives to education and social service and the spiritual wellbeing of their people in the most difficult of circumstances. On page 91, it is asserted that AD Patel opposed an inquiry into the sugar industry because they wanted the CSR bought out. That is not true. Patel opposed an enquiry of the type that Trustram Eve was heading: he wanted a binding court of arbitration of the type that Lord Denning headed in 1969. The Eve contract which is made out to be balanced and fair-minded was the same document which sent hundreds of cane growers into bankruptcy in the 1960s, and which even the strike-breaking Kisan Sangh repudiated. The growers' leaders who led the strike against the CSR in 1960 were motivated by power, not economic justice, Scarr writes, as did the colonial officialdom and indeed the CSR itself at the time (7). Scarr recounts an unauthenticated conversation in a London urinal, of all places, between Trustram Eve and Lord Denning with Eve saying, 'Tom you have made a bloody mess of the Fiji sugar industry' (67). This is hearsay: Scarr was not privy to the conversation between the two peeing peers. The Denning contract did not make a mess in Fiji: it led to decades of prosperity in the sugar industry. But what else would you expect Eve to say whose contract Denning had rejected completely as being unfair to the growers? Denning was proud of his Fiji work, he told me in a handwritten note in 1990. Scarr calls the *Pacific Review* an 'intermittently racist weekly' (54). It was not racist: it was anti-colonial, and there is a difference even if it is not obvious to Scarr. He writes that the NFP submission to the Street Commission in 1975 was drawn up for the Opposition by an 'imperfectly briefed QC from overseas' (222). The submission was written by political scientist Raj Vasil of Victoria University, Wellington, and presented by Tom Kellock, QC, a sometime Legal Advisor in the Commonwealth and Foreign Office, intimately familiar with constitu-

tional problems in independent Africa and Southeast Asia, a strong supporter of UK's Liberal Party and a passionate believer in proportional representation. He expressed great pleasure in being paid [five thousand pounds] to argue for a cause so close to his heart. And he was so well briefed that the Commission accepted the broad thrust of his case for proportional representation.

'On tolerably just grounds in light of pre-election threats and promises, he expected senior Fijian civil servants to be moved out if not scapegoated,' Scarr writes of the NFP-FLP Coalition government upon election in 1987 (315). On just grounds? What promises and threats? And Scarr expects readers to take him at his word? Reddy and his men are predictably but outrageously portrayed as the real power behind the Bavadra throne, as the violence-threatening Fijian nationalists asserted at the time: 'Reddy the Gun, Bavadra the Bullet.' 'If Reddy were anything of a man,' Scarr approvingly quotes an unidentified Alliance source as saying (314), he would have proposed a government of national unity with the Alliance immediately. But the call was not Reddy's to make anyway: the NFP had only three ministers in the Bavadra cabinet of fourteen. Scarr comes dangerously close to endorsing the Taukei Movement line, blaming Indo-Fijians for the mess that followed after the 1987 elections. Misrepresentations like these abound in the text. Some of them are more serious than others. On page 304, Scarr writes mischievously that the Fiji Labour Party in 1987 formed a coalition not with the NFP but with the Flower faction of the party. This was pure Alliance propaganda. People like Shardha Nand, who represented a disaffected splinter group, would have dropped their opposition to the Coalition arrangement at once if given a seat. Their opposition was opportunistic, not ideological or principled. But if it was a coalition with the Flowers, then Scarr needs to explain why such well known Doves as Balwant Singh Rakkha, Samresan Pillay, Harnam Singh Golian, Maan Singh among others were in the Coalition camp?

Inevitably in a text of this size there are some low-level errors. For example, it is General Vernon Walters, not Walker. Sir Derek Jakeway was not the last governor of Fiji; Sir Robert Foster was. On page 234, Scarr means Maitoga, not Mataitoga. And so on. But there is a pattern of errors in the book that is disturbing. Consistently, Scarr gets Indian names wrong. It is Parmanandam, not Parmanendram; Vivekananda, not Vivikenda, Moidin Koya, not Mohammed, Sir Vijay was not a Sikh even though his surname was Singh: not all Singhs are Sikhs, as everyone knows; Bhamji, not Bahmji. I cringed when I read (274) that 'Sita Mata' (Scarr's description denoting affectionate reverence!) was the wife of

Lord Krishna, when every Hindu child in the world knows her as the consort of Lord Rama. And it was news to me to be told that 'Fiji had been designated as a homeland for the devotees of Lord Shiva' (6). Lord Shiva, and not Lord Krishna! These errors point to Scarr's lack of comprehension of things Indian despite being immersed in researching the country's history for nearly forty years. But to be fair to him, Scarr is not alone in committing these sorts of errors. Most European observers of the Fiji scene, long used to seeing things Fijian through rose-tinted glasses, have an understandably jaundiced perception of non-Fijian issues and aspirations while pretending complete impartiality and fairness.

For those with the patience to persist to the end, and these will mainly be a small band of aficionados of Fijian history, there are nuggets of information scattered throughout the text they will find interesting. The early chapters on Ratu Mara's cultural inheritance and his education are done deftly. His time at Oxford is related through some memorable anecdotes. There is much information on Mara's career and experience in district administration that is not generally known. The links that Mara forged with people in London, such as Henry Hall of the Colonial Office, paid rich dividends for him and his cause later on. The Fijian leaders had important contacts in London that Indian leaders did not. Ratu Mara's leadership in regional matters receives well-deserved attention. His tenacity in pursuing indigenous Fijian interests in the negotiations leading to independence is well handled and rings true. The impression is left that Mara was by instinct and inclination a Fijian nationalist in the old conservative sense, and a multiracialist by necessity. That rings true too. When he seemingly abandoned that Fijian cause, as when embracing the multiracial 1997 Constitution, he fell from grace in Fijian eyes. In Scarr's assessment, he had moved too far ahead of his people and paid the ultimate price. Ratu Mara's complex and at times conflicted relationship with his mentor, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, is described in some of the best and most moving passages in the book. All these and much more the book has, but it is the overall presentation of material that leaves much to be desired. And that is a great pity.

To return to Ratu Mara, he was the pre-eminent Fijian political leader of his time, formed by the values and understandings of his special world of protocol and hierarchy in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They served him well in simpler times less affected by forces of modernity and the demands and challenges of multiracial forces. By the time he reached the end of his career, the world of his childhood had changed beyond recognition. In his failure to apprehend the significance of these changes lay his special tragedy. The things for which Ratu Mara was

known and of which he was proud now lie disregarded on the margins of Fijian political discourse. He believed that race was a fact of life and to that end he helped create the edifice of an independent nation on the pillars of racial compartmentalisation. That is now being dismantled in the name of a common, non-racial citizenship. He believed in the ideology of chiefly rule. That too is being eroded. Above all, he believed in the importance of the unity of the indigenous Fijian people. But that unity, at least politically, was contrived and conditional, and it is on its way out as the fears and phobias of the past fade away, especially the fear of Indian domination. The military, which was nurtured during Ratu Mara's long reign as the unspoken but ultimate bastion of Fijian power, returned to destroy much of what the Alliance leader had worked all his life to protect and preserve, and which eventually hounded him out of office in 2000. Ratu Mara's legacy did not survive him. In the strangest and saddest of ironies, the vision of those whom Ratu Mara opposed all his active political life is now being considered seriously and sympathetically among his own people whom he led for more than a generation. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara helped make modern Fiji. Tragically, he also helped unmake it.

**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](mailto:brijvilash@gmail.com)