

**Brij Lal's Biography of A D Patel - A Vision for Change:  
A.D. Patel and the Politics of Fiji**

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A.D. Patel and Ratu Kamisese Mara were the outstanding political leaders and adversaries during Fiji's transition from colonial rule to independence. People who can recall the Fiji of the 1960s will have vivid memories of Ambalal Dayhabhai Patel, Ratu Mara's resolute but not unsympathetic opponent on the political stage. India-born Patel (1905-1969) was the leading advocate for the common franchise and the founding president of the National Federation Party (NFP)<sup>1</sup>. Rarely does a leader emerge with a combination of such intellectual power, vision, and energetic resolve. The most formidable lawyer and debater in the Fiji of his day, Patel was a most eloquent exponent of his vision of an integrated multi-ethnic nation and a tireless advocate for social and economic as well as political reforms. He was an exceptionally forceful, charismatic figure capable of mesmerising oratory before mass audiences. Yet in face to face encounters disarmingly open and unassuming, to the surprise of many visitors to Fiji who inferred from demonising press reports that he must be a dangerous demagogue.

Lal's biography, recounting many aspects and episodes of Patel's public life and career, is a most readable and stimulating book, with the qualities of engagement, clarity, eloquence, and well-argued discussion based on detailed research.<sup>2</sup> Lal's deep admiration for Patel inevitably resulted in a rather idealised portrait. But then engaging and coherent his-

<sup>1</sup>The party was launched in 1964 as the Federation Party, initially based on the federation of sugar cane farmers formed in 1960 for an industrial struggle with the Australian CSR Company. The prefix 'National' was added after the party was joined by a small indigenous Fijian group, the National Democratic Party, late in 1968. For simplicity I will refer to the NFP throughout this paper.

<sup>2</sup>My discussion of Lal's biography of Patel draws partly on my review published in *The Contemporary Pacific* 1998, 11(2): 484-87.

tory cannot be written without some bias and selective emphasis. The book well illustrates historian David Lowenthal's dictum: 'History is persuasive because it is organised by and filtered through individual minds, not in spite of that fact. Subjective interpretation gives it life and meaning' (1985: 218).

Chapter 1, *Retrospect*, sketches the emergence of Indian society and politics in Fiji - the setting into which Patel stepped at the age of only 23 in 1928, soon to join the leadership of the campaign for political equality with the minority European community under a common roll electoral system.<sup>3</sup> The common franchise campaign was abandoned in the early 1930s and not revived until the 1960s, this time with Patel in the lead.

Chapter 2, *Child of Gujarat*, is one of the most illuminating sections of the book, describing aspects of life in Gujarat early last century which profoundly influenced Patel's outlook and dispositions. He was the pampered first-born in a landed farming family of the Patidar group, the most economically and politically powerful class in the Kheda district. After excelling in school, Patel's parents sent him to the UK for university studies in preparation, they hoped, for a prestigious career in the Indian Civil Service. But in London the young man met the Anglo-Jewish lawyer Henry Polak who was championing the causes of overseas Indian populations. Polak was particularly concerned about Fiji and inspired Patel to go there after completing his law degree, 'giving up what would certainly have been a prosperous legal career and a prominent place in Indian public life' (Lal 1997: 29).

It was in Patel's home district that Gandhi launched his campaign of peaceful resistance to British rule and the Patidars became famous supporters of the movement. Patel, more than any other leader, brought the spirit of the movement to Fiji. I vividly recall him launching the NFP's first election campaign before a packed audience in Suva's old Century Theatre in 1966, quoting the poet Wordsworth's famous remark on the French Revolution: 'Bliss it is to be alive at this dawn, but to be young is very heaven'. This had been Patel's own fortune when in his teens he experienced the beginning of Gandhi's anti-colonial campaign at first hand. Throughout his life, Lal writes, Patel maintained a deep interest in India, especially Gandhian politics and philosophy. Twice in the 1940s he travelled to India to present Fiji Indian grievances to the Indian National Congress, and he was at the forefront in the Fiji Indians' celebrations of

<sup>3</sup> Indigenous Fijians were represented in the Legislative Council by nominees of the Council of Chiefs. Indian leaders did not include Fijians in their argument for a common franchise until Fijians were enfranchised in 1963.

India's independence in 1947. He was a leading member of the Gujarati community most of whose elders in the 1960s had come of age in India.

The 'leverage of India' was important for Fiji Indian leaders as a counter to the colonial government's favouritism to Indigenous Fijians and Europeans. However, after India's independence its leaders were less willing to give support to radical leadership in the remaining colonies. By the late 1960s Patel had become embittered over this, once writing to his eldest son: 'Indians in Fiji and other colonies used to get some assistance from the Viceroy in their hour of need, but since India has become independent, we have received no help from India. From Indira downward, all are selfishly absorbed in the rat race for personal power and God help India. In such circumstances it would be idiotic of us to expect any help from that corner' (Lal 1997: 239).

Of course, India's influence on Patel was not merely political and secular. Patel was born into a family adhering to the Vaishnav tradition of Hinduism. These devotees of Lord Vishnu were committed to sympathising with 'the lower castes and classes' and to taking responsibility for practical action in support of their welfare and advancement. Patel acquired a deep knowledge of religious literature and drew on it eclectically to embellish his political speeches. In his work for the South Indians' cultural and educational body the TISI Sangam, based in Nadi where Patel lived, he was able to combine his passion for spiritual values with his commitment to social reform, giving particular attention to educational needs. And it was in this context, and in related work for the sugar cane farmers' industrial struggles, that Swami Rudrananda of the Ramakrishna Mission became his closest lifelong friend and confidante.

Chapter 3, *Into the Fray*, details the first phase of Patel's public career in Fiji from 1928 to 1940 - his influence in the Sangam, his alliance with Swami Rudrananda, his involvement in the Fiji Indian Congress and the Indian Association of Fiji. Especially interesting is Lal's discussion of the factors that led Patel to rely so heavily on the South Indian community for political support. These were his dissatisfaction with acrimonious conflict within the North Indian Hindu community and between Hindus and Muslims, his wish to assist the South Indians as the most disadvantaged cultural group among the Fiji Indians, and his close friendships formed with their leaders.

Chapter 4, *Company and Kisan*, recounts the formation of the sugar cane farmers' unions and the 1943 cane farmers' harvesting boycott, Patel's 'baptism of fire in Fiji politics'. Lal's account of this episode brings out the man's integrity, resolution, skill and courage in pursuit of justice

for the farmers in their conflicts with the Australian-owned Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR Co.) which treated them like serfs.

Chapter 5, *Flesh on the Skeleton*, deals with Patel's first election to the colonial Legislative Council in 1944 largely on the basis of his leadership in the 1943 strike. In the Council debates, he focussed especially on social reform issues - 'At the core of his vision was the call for an open, equitable and non-racial society'. There is also an excellent assessment of the old controversy about the Indians and the Pacific War. Lal brings out very clearly the justice of their protest against service under conditions of racial inequality when the Government claimed the war was being waged to secure peace, justice and freedom. He further demonstrates that irrespective of this protest neither the government nor the CSR Co. was keen to recruit Indians to the forces, partly because that would deplete labour for the sugar industry.

In Chapter 6, *Interregnum*, we learn about Patel's long sojourn in the political wilderness from 1950 to 1963 - due mainly, Lal argues, to his rivalry with the then most senior Indian leader, Vishnu Deo, who in the 1950s held the greatest organisational resources for a political career and sat in the Executive Council, the inner sanctum of the colonial government. There were further reasons for Patel's temporary political eclipse, such as the decline of India as a radical critic of colonial rule, and factional splits within the Sangam and the South Indian farmers' union, the Maha Sangh.

Chapter 7, *Fire in the Cane Fields*, discusses Patel's return to public life, initially via leadership in the sugar cane farmers' harvesting boycott against the CSR Co. in 1960. He had to be persuaded to join this leadership by Siddiq Koya and Swami Rudrananda. They later pressured him to resume his political career as the British began to prepare Fiji for self-government.

The last four chapters discuss Patel's actions in the 1960s, the decade of decolonisation, particularly his leadership of the National Federation Party (1964-1969) and his determined push for the introduction of a common franchise. Lal also highlights Patel's outstanding success as member for social services from 1964 to 1966 in the 'membership' system which preceded the ministerial system. Patel drew respect and liking from colonial officials for his dedicated and professional work for educational and other social service reforms, endeavouring especially to promote the importance of multiracial schools. The National Provident Fund and the University of the South Pacific are founded partly on Patel's efforts.

Lal goes so far as to suggest that A.D.Patel was the decisive force for the ending of colonial rule. In support of this claim he emphasises Patel's steadfast commitment to the vision of a united nation based on a common franchise, his being the first local leader to call (in 1968) for independence from British rule, and his efforts in the mid 1960s to maintain United Nations pressure on the UK government to accelerate constitutional reform for Fiji.

Some readers will be impatient with the detail of Lal's discussion of certain episodes in Patel's career – for example, his leadership in the sugar industry strikes and his contributions to debates in the Legislative Council. But the detail is worth examining because Lal has astutely presented and dissected it to demonstrate Patel's qualities: his intellectual power, courage, endurance, and strategic skills.

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For all the book's considerable strengths and appeal, it does not critically assess Patel's contribution to Fiji's political development. I cannot agree that Patel was the decisive force for the ending of colonial rule. By the 1960s Britain had no desire to hold on to Fiji, and was impatient with the resistance to change from the Indigenous Fijian leaders. Steps towards self-government were being taken before Patel reluctantly resumed political leadership in 1963. His adversaries were the Fijian and European leaders, far more than the colonial government on both the issues of decolonisation and the common franchise. Indeed it might be argued that in the achievement of self-government and independence, Patel's campaign was redundant, for all its brilliance and drama, and that by its rigidity it helped set the ethnic polarisation in electoral politics that deeply troubled Fiji for decades.<sup>4</sup>

Lal is undoubtedly right to emphasise the value of Patel's commitment to the vision of a united nation based on a common roll electoral system. But as Lal notes, even some of his staunchest political opponents leading the Alliance Party, including Ratu Mara, acknowledged the virtue of this vision, agreeing with him that this should be a long term goal. Their quarrel was with the uncompromising urgency of Patel's demand. They insisted that given the deep economic inequalities, the cultural and social divide between the Indigenous Fijians and the Indians, and the Indians' demographic superiority, Fiji was not ready for a common fran-

<sup>4</sup> My critique of Lal's assessment of Patel's part in the politics of decolonization is based largely on my own research (Norton, 1990; 2002, 2004).

chise.

The question of how the electoral system should be reformed was the major issue of political contention during decolonization. Lal and some other writers on Fiji's modern history have maintained that the failure of the British rulers to introduce a common electoral franchise to replace the system of communal representation is substantially to blame for post-colonial Fiji's recurrent political instability. They have argued that common electoral rolls and elimination of ethnic reservation of parliament seats would have encouraged multi-ethnic collaboration on the basis of shared interests. While I certainly agree that this reform was desirable as a long-term objective, it is important to recognise that a common franchise is not a panacea for ethnic division in political life.<sup>5</sup>

I share Lal's admiration for Patel who I knew and observed at election rallies, and as a young researcher I was attracted by the NFP's anti-colonial rhetoric calling for ethnic equality before excited mass audiences. However, I cannot agree that Patel's campaign, in the militant way in which he and his NFP colleagues conducted it, was a positive factor for Fiji's political development in those critical years of decolonisation. Mistaken actions were taken, with harmful long term consequences, by these leaders no less than by their political opponents and British colonial officials. The acrimonious ethnic polarisation in the 1960s was determined less by the communal electoral system than by the militant campaign for its replacement by common electoral rolls and non-reserved parliament seats.

There was a paradoxical contrast in the contention about the electoral system. The NFP preached a universalist ideology and called for abolition of communal representation to affirm equality among the citizens and encourage national integration. Yet it remained essentially communal in leadership and following, and appeals for Indian political unity were central in election campaigning. Patel told me soon after the 1966 elections that his primary aim was not to forge inter-ethnic unity but to demonstrate to influential authorities outside Fiji (the UK government and the United Nations) that Indians, then nearly 51% of the population, were united in the NFP.

The mainly Fijian-supported Alliance Party emphasised the strength of ethnic differences and the potential for destructive conflict. It insisted on the preservation of a communal electoral system to secure Indigenous

<sup>5</sup> Trinidad and Guyana, societies with which Fiji is often compared, demonstrate this with their strong tendencies over many years to ethnic polarisation in electoral competition.

Fijians against the possibility of Indian dominance and thereby to ensure political stability and economic growth. To its Fijian village audiences the party gave assurances that an Alliance victory would ensure that Fijians held power when self-government came. Yet with its emphasis on communal division and potential conflict, it was the Alliance Party that succeeded in building substantial multi-ethnic leadership and support.

While ostensibly aiming to promote political integration, the push for a common franchise contributed to ethnic tension by calling for complete abolition of ethnic distinctions in political representation and by its emphasis on uniting Indians and attacking Europeans and leading Fijian chiefs whose alliance Fijians had long viewed as protective. The NFP campaign was politically unwise given the strength of ethnic disparities, the Fijians' very limited experience of electoral politics and their anxiety over the prospect of British rule ending. Patel, who dominated the NFP, maintained an intellectualist approach to reform, arguing the logical merits of a common franchise for building a new nation but paying little heed to the nature and strength of the Indigenous Fijian resistance.

Although the challenge to European power and privilege held some appeal to many Fijians, Patel's militant style of leadership with his common franchise demand and criticisms of Fijian chiefs and the Fijian Administration, did much more to alienate Fijians than to persuade their interest in reforms. Several factors encouraged Fijian hostility to the common franchise proposal. Especially since the 1940s when Indians first outnumbered them, Fijians had feared a threat of Indian political domination. In the 1960s most Fijians were subsistence villagers acutely conscious of Indian demographic, economic, and educational superiority.<sup>6</sup> The decision to prepare Fiji for self-government alarmed them with the prospect of losing colonial protection. Their apprehension was deepened by the United Nations pressure on the UK to grant Fiji independence with a common franchise. They feared that the British might acquiesce to the UN pressure and that Fijian interests, particularly their lands, would be in jeopardy. Moreover, the Fijians had been encouraged by their leaders to view the hard-line stand of the NFP leaders in support of farmers in the sugar industry dispute of 1960 as a threat to Fiji's stability and prosperity and a demonstration of those leaders' irresponsibility.

Until 1963 Indigenous Fijians had not experienced electoral politics but were represented in the colonial legislature by nominees of the Coun-

<sup>6</sup> Indians were nearly 51% of the population, Fijians 43%. Although the difference in population growth rate was lessening the Indian rate was still substantially greater than that of the Fijian.

cil of Chiefs. The extension of the franchise to Fijians compelled their political leaders to devise rhetoric for competition with new Fijian leaders emerging in the trade unions and the urban middleclass. The established leaders, most of high chiefly rank, stressed the need to promote Fijian unity to counter the risks that decolonisation would bring, particularly the threat of Indian dominance and possibly the complete severing of Fiji's protective link with the British Crown.

The NFP, with its common franchise call, embodied that perceived threat and so had an inflammatory impact on the Fijian mood. Just as the party, under the common franchise banner, mobilised a majority of Indians behind it, equally it helped mobilise most Indigenous Fijians behind the Alliance Party. The Fijian Affairs Board chiefs making the transition from the security of their authority in the Fijian Administration and the Council of Chiefs to popular elections were advantaged by the NFP campaign they denounced. The Indian radicalism strengthened their popular relevance just when social and economic change had been encouraging dissatisfaction with them.

An NFP principal, speaking in the Legislative Council debate on the outcome of the 1970 constitutional conference, in which the party had agreed to shelve its common franchise demand, acknowledged the danger in the NFP's failure to understand the Fijian fears. He stressed the importance of advice from two Fijians who joined the party's leadership early in 1968: 'If they had not warned us about the deep undercurrents and the deep thinking of the Fijian people on many matters...we might easily have taken the wrong path, and the two parties, locked...in bitter confrontation, might have taken a path which may have been disastrous to the country' (Ramrakha, 1970: 228).

The NFP's militant campaign for a common franchise was so greatly at odds with the possibilities for political success that one must ask why it was pushed so strongly. The campaign must be understood in relation to the universalist values central to the vision of social and political modernity that the United Nations was committed to uphold. Patel's political resolve was encouraged by the doctrinaire principles of the UN declaration of December 1960 which demanded the ending of colonial rule everywhere 'without conditions or reservations', and with a common franchise and the abolition of discriminatory legislation.

For several years NFP leaders hoped that the new Labour Party government in the UK, under UN pressure and recognising that the NFP was the major voice of half Fiji's population, would favour the demand for political equality and override the European and Fijian resistance. They especially valued the support of India which, through most of the 1960s,

was one of the severest critics at the UN against British colonial power. The decision for a militant campaign was taken in the context of the perceived importance of these external political agents. The NFP saw in them the prospect of persuading a reform that would ensure the Indians' security when self-government came.

Just as significant as the UN pressure, as an influence on NFP militancy, was the party's impact on Indian political and social consciousness. The vibrant public rallies with combative oratory engendered feelings of strength and pride set against a colonial regime seen as supporting European power and privilege. These sentiments sustained the party's aggressive momentum despite its very weak prospects for success in both the domestic and international arenas. The imperative to strengthen its dominance in Indian leadership discouraged the party from accommodating to the Fijian and European resistance to radical change. Yet that resistance was the domestic political reality with which the NFP had eventually to come to terms after an intimidating display of Indigenous Fijian anger.

The prospect for the introduction of a common franchise in 1960s Fiji was minimal. It would be unrealistic to suggest that Ratu Mara and his Alliance Party colleagues could have been persuaded to make a major concession to the NFP call for this reform or that the British government might, in the prevailing political situation, have insisted on it. Among the Indigenous Fijian leaders, Mara was by far the most able and the most progressive in social and political vision. In the 1950s, when serving as a district officer in predominantly Indian areas, he had advocated multi-ethnic schooling and a common franchise for town government.<sup>7</sup> But as the pre-eminent Indigenous political leader in the 1960s, he was constrained by the deep conservatism of colleagues in the Fijian Association (backbone of the Alliance Party) and the Great Council of Chiefs and was himself averse to a common franchise at national level where Indigenous interests were seen to be potentially at risk. As they began planning Fiji's self-government British officials did favourably contemplate a common franchise. But they soon feared the likelihood of instability and ethnic violence should they attempt to impose such a reform, particularly as Fijians predominated in the army and police (Norton, 2002: 140-142).

A more plausible possibility would have been the NFP leaders choosing to moderate their common roll quest early in the decolonisation process. This would have resulted in a less antagonistic opposition be-

tween the parties and might have opened the way for more inter-ethnic cooperation on both sides. A decision to continue dialogue with political opponents in Suva early in 1965 by discussing the electoral system issue in a flexible way, signalling the possibility of compromise, might have encouraged at the first constitutional conference later that year a mood more conducive to an outcome acceptable to the party. This in turn might have favoured more inter-ethnic collaboration in subsequent elections instead of the aggravation of the ethnic political divide which did occur.

It is true that pressures and incentives for the NFP to remain firm in its call for the common franchise were very strong. Aggrieved over the outcome of the 1965 constitutional conference in London which gave a political advantage to the Fijians and Europeans, Patel remained hopeful of support in the international arena and determined to preserve his dominance of Indian leadership to persuade that support. The 'common roll' cry acquired powerful symbolic force, iconic of legitimate Indian leadership against alleged injustice and insecurity under colonial rule. To soften the demand might have been seen to discredit the party's image as fearless champion of Indian rights.<sup>8</sup>

However, there were moments of internal conflict when the NFP might have modified its approach. Toward the end of 1967, there was strong support within the leadership for ending the party's boycott of the Legislative Council, though Patel overruled this (Alley, 1976: 327-8). After their meeting early in 1968 with emissaries of India's government (now sympathetic to the UK's and Mara's caution on the Fiji question), there was again dissension about the boycott (Fiji Political Intelligence Committee, 1968). Moreover, popular Indian sentiment in support of the push for a common franchise was not comparable to the strength of Indigenous Fijian sentiment against it. For most Indians, conditions for leasing Fijian-owned land and access to other economic opportunities were more important issues.

Patel and his colleagues in NFP leadership might have chosen to put greater emphasis on economic and social development issues including those of special concern to Indigenous Fijians and those cutting across the ethnic divide, matters that the leaders often did speak on at public rallies. Greater progress toward a common franchise might then have been made in preparation for independence. Instead the traumatic experience of intimidating Fijian protest marches and rallies provoked by the aggressive

<sup>7</sup> The common franchise was introduced for town boards in 1967, and for Suva and Lautoka municipal councils in 1970.

<sup>8</sup> In Roderick Alley's words, 'The stridency with which [the NFP] began propounding the need for a common roll was due, at least in part, to fears of Indian communal disunity at a time when it could be least afforded' (1976: 160).

NFP push for radical reform contributed to the weakening of the Indian leaders' interest in the issue. When in 1975 Prime Minister Ratu Mara rejected the recommendation of an official inquiry for the introduction of some common roll electorates without ethnically-reserved seats, the NFP leaders did not strongly protest (Lal, 1992: 223-224).

Fiji's major political problem has long been that of how to reconcile the international principle of universal human rights with the domestic reality of a powerful deep-rooted demand for special Indigenous rights (especially to prerogatives in the state). Patel's insistent call for a common franchise brought this dilemma to the forefront in combative public dialogue and a dangerous political crisis.

The NFP's militancy, expressed in its months-long boycott of the colonial parliament in 1967-1968, provoked a Fijian protest movement that almost sparked widespread inter-ethnic violence.<sup>9</sup> The genie of aggressive indigenous nationalism had been released for the first time with Mara's tacit encouragement. This weakened the Indians' political resolve, encouraged them to conciliation, and strengthened the Fijian conviction of entitlement to power. There was, too, a shocked recognition by Mara and his colleagues that a catastrophe had been narrowly averted. The traumatic episode encouraged the political adversaries to work together to achieve agreements in preparation for the constitutional conference in London that led to Fiji's independence.

The case can be made, however, that it was Patel's death and the passing of NFP leadership to Siddiq Koya, his younger Fiji-born and more pragmatic lieutenant, that most favoured the rapprochement which led to independence. Another influence was Ratu Mara's success, with the help of India, in persuading the United Nations to cease pressuring the UK government to move Fiji rapidly to independence with a common franchise, a pressure that had reinforced the NFP's insistence on that reform. Early in 1968, two official emissaries from India, reciprocating Mara's visit to New Delhi, had met with NFP leaders. They criticised the boycott and advised against persisting with the common franchise demand. They warned that some other UN members were also moderating their position on Fiji and urged the NFP leaders to work with their Fijian counterparts to achieve independence from Britain as soon as possible, and perhaps after that return to their common roll quest. The advice was reinforced by further official visitors from India in November (Norton, unpublished).

<sup>9</sup>For accounts of this crisis see Ali (1980: 156-158), Norton (1990: 98-102), and Lal (1992: 203-5).

At the London conference the NFP leaders agreed to shelve their common franchise call until a post-independence royal commission on the electoral system. To Indian critics of this turn to compromise on what had been the NFP's central objective, Koya responded that 'party interest has been subordinated to the interest of the nation'. The common roll, he now insisted, can only be introduced 'if a significant number of Fijians accept it' (Koya, 1970).<sup>10</sup>

It was a major failing of the decolonisation process that it was not accompanied by a balanced development of multi-ethnic political organisation. This was at least partly because political competition remained tied to the most ethnically divisive issue: the NFP's demand for radical electoral reform at a time of heightened Indigenous Fijian feelings of insecurity and suspicion.<sup>11</sup> In their confidential talks in Suva in preparation for the 1970 conference, the NFP and Alliance Party leaders finally broke from that impasse. But by then ethnic opposition in political organisation and election campaigning had been set for many years to come, the major cause of the fragility of democratic government in Fiji.

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How might Patel have continued to deal with the common franchise issue had he lived on as NFP leader? The leadership change did smooth efforts to reach agreement with the Alliance Party, for among the NFP principals Patel had the strongest investment in an unyielding call for the common franchise and in playing to an international audience. Yet there are grounds for supposing that under Patel's leadership the outcome of the bi-party dialogue in Fiji in preparation for the final constitutional conference might not have been very different than it was under Koya's, even if by a slower and more difficult path.

Given the prevailing political conditions it is likely that Patel would eventually have agreed to a compromise. Towards the end of 1968 the party faced daunting realities in both the domestic and international political arenas: the potential threat of Indigenous Fijian violence and Ratu Mara's influence with India and the United Nations. Either would cause

<sup>10</sup> In the Legislative Council debate on the constitutional conference, Koya declared: 'Nothing would suit Fiji better at this stage than a compromise on this vital matter'. (*Fiji Legislative Council Debates* 17 June 1970:197).

<sup>11</sup> Fiji Indian historian Ahmed Ali concluded that the NFP's common franchise demand was 'a gross political misjudgement: by clinging to it they left themselves without room for manoeuvre' (Ali 1979: 17).

Patel to contemplate how problematic continued insistence on a common franchise would be for his party's prospects. In the on-going Suva talks in 1969 Patel probably would have softened his demand, especially under pressure from fellow NFP leaders and from members of his own Gujarati community many of whom, concerned for their security and the future of their businesses, were by then favouring political moderation. Although in the first session of the Suva talks, the only one held before his death, Patel continued to argue for the common franchise, he also proposed a transition phase in which some seats would be reserved to allay fears for the security of ethnic group interests.

Indo-Fijian leaders did not strongly revive the call for a common franchise after Fiji achieved its independence. The NFP and the Fiji Labour Party did, however, propose it in their joint submission to the 1995 constitutional review, and the new constitution that resulted from the review introduced a minority of parliament seats to be non-reserved and filled by common franchise.

Today, Fiji has a full common franchise, ironically by the will of the strongest organisation of Indigenous Fijian power and long after Indo-Fijian leaders had ceased to push for it. An army-backed regime imposed this reform in the context of a greatly decreased Indo-Fijian population,<sup>12</sup> a resolve to suppress de-stabilising Indigenous nationalism, and the need for a self-validating nation-building mission. Once the major objective of radical Indian politicians and anathema to the Indigenous Fijians, the common franchise now has central place in the ideology of a predominantly Indigenous Fijian government.

Were Patel to return to life in the Fiji of today, he would surely claim that he had at long last been vindicated and be astonished at how this had come about. The route to the radical reform could hardly have been contemplated in Patel's day. Whether or not the reform will help to realise his vision of a unified nation transcending the ethnic divide, remains to be seen.

<sup>12</sup> The 2007 census reported that Indians were approximately 37% and Fijians approximately 57% of Fiji's population.

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