

Education and Integration in Fiji: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The policy of segregation that the colonial government practised in schools during most of its rule contributed to Fiji becoming a plural society. Though there was no segregation from the time Fiji became self governing in the mid-1960s, there was little integration at the time of independence in 1970. On coming to power, the Alliance government of Ratu Mara wanted to use education for integrating the different ethnic groups in the country by having multiracial schools and cross cultural language learning. It failed in its efforts because the Opposition did not support the attempts by the government to implement its policies for achieving integration.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that one of the reasons for the perpetuation of a plural society in Fiji was the segregated education system that the colonial government maintained during most of its rule. As a result, at independence, Fiji was an ethnically divided country. The major challenge facing the new government was transforming Fiji into an integrated nation. It was believed that education had a major role to play in achieving this aim. Ratu Mara, who became Prime Minister at independence, considered education as 'the chosen instrument of nation building' (Legislative Council Debates [hereafter cited as Leg. Co.] 2 Dec, 1969: 1099).

Throughout the colonial period schools had been the major instrument for maintaining segregation. Government schools like Suva Grammar, Queen Victoria and Ratu Kadavulevu were among the most ethnically exclusive schools in the colony. When the colonial government failed to open schools for the Indians the Indian community started establishing their own schools to educate their children, getting teachers from India, as they were reluctant to send their children to Christian schools for fear that they might be converted. Finally when the government established a few schools for Indian children these were separate schools.

There, thus, emerged separate schools for Europeans, Fijians and Indians.

The Indian population had gone to great trouble in educating their children. Indians knew that education would enable them to hold their own against the Europeans, who had been exploiting their ignorance and blocking their progress. Until the 1950s, ethnic Fijians were leading Indians in education. However, after that Indo-Fijians started forging ahead. This was largely through their own community efforts. Ethnic Fijian education could not keep pace because of the colonial policy of not providing higher education for Fijian children. In the following decades ethnic Fijian achievement in education fell far behind that of the other ethnic groups. The 1969 Education Commission noted that correcting this disparity was imperative for building an integrated nation.

The paper argues that education failed to integrate the major ethnic groups and contribute to nation building. This is because the opposition then, the National Federation Party (NFP), politicized education, making it an election issue in the 1972 and 1977 general elections, thereby destroying the prospects of a non-partisan approach to education.

The 1969 Education Commission

In 1969, on the eve of independence, an Education Commission was appointed to look into the system of education and to advise the government on the direction education should take in independent Fiji. Both Fijian and Indian leaders had been asking for such a commission but for different reasons. The Fijian Affairs Board and the Council of Chiefs had wanted a commission to look into the problems of Fijian education, while the Opposition National Federation Party called for a commission to study the question of free education. The Government decided to appoint a commission with 'wide terms of reference to review the whole of the system of education in Fiji and to make recommendations' on all aspects (Leg. Co. Debates, 29 January, 1969: 82-83).

The Education Commission made a thorough study of the country's education system and submitted its report which was tabled in the Legislative Council in March 1970, a few months before the country became independent. However, it generated little interest and there was no debate and hardly any comment on its recommendations. But during the debate on Fiji's Sixth Development Plan (DPVI) the Minister for Social Services talked about the Commission and its recommendations. The education policy outlined in DPVI was mainly based on those recommendations. The government accepted most of the recommendations of the Commission and used these as the guideline for formulating its policies.

The DPVI, which was introduced in Parliament a month after the country became independent, represented a statement of the government's economic and social policies. One of its aims was to build a 'multiracial' society where everyone had equal rights and equal opportunities. The 1969 Education Commission believed that education had an important role to play in integrating society. It outlined three major steps to achieve this; these were: multiracial schools, cross-cultural studies, and specific measures to improve Fijian education so that there would be no disparity in achievement between Fijians and others (Report of the Education Commission, 1969; see also Gaunder, 1999: 138).

Multiracialism in Schools

From the 1930s Indians had been asking for multiracial schooling but both Fijians and Europeans rejected it for different reasons. Europeans wanted segregated schooling to continue as a way of maintaining their control of the status quo while Fijians wanted their separate schools for fear that otherwise they would be dominated by other races and eventually lose their culture. This fear was heightened by the fact that they had become a minority in the 1940s and comprised a little over 40 per cent of the population at the time of Independence in 1970.

By 1960's, the policies of segregation started being abolished, with schools like Suva Grammar (which had been exclusively for European children) becoming multiracial. Exclusively Fijian schools like Queen Victoria School (QVS) were slower to change. In 1964 A. D. Patel, the member for Social Services, a portfolio which had responsibility for education, wanted to promote multiracial education but the Fijians rejected it.

Gaunder (1999) explains how the Alliance government wanted to implement the recommendations of the 1969 Education Commission but did not get co-operation of the Opposition in its efforts to do so, even though the Opposition had not attacked these policies but had given its silent consent. One of the major reasons for the country remaining unintegrated was the Opposition's response to the Government's educational policies. The NFP, while it had no concrete policies to offer, attacked government's education policies and made them into election issues in the first (1972) and second (1977) general elections after independence.

Problems of Voluntarism in Education

The 1969 Education Commission identified the voluntary system as the main reason for the persistence of communal divisions in schools.

Voluntarism in education meant leaving the responsibility for opening and running schools to voluntary agencies rather than the state providing schools. Even before Fiji became a colony, there were schools established in almost all the villages by the Christian missionaries so the elementary education of Fijian children was taken care of. The Methodist Mission, which ran most of these schools, wanted to relinquish their control of the village schools in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The initial plan was for the government to take over these schools.

James Russell, who was the Director of Education at that time, did not favour such a policy so many of these schools were handed over to local committees (Hopkin, 1977: 86; Gaunder, 1999:89-91). The Education Department, moreover, neglected to exert effective control over them; most of these schools deteriorated in quality, and standards declined (Hopkin, 1977: 91).

Then there was the growing number of Indian children in the colony for whom there was hardly any school for over three decades (since the arrival of the first Indians in 1879). The only Indian schools in the early 1900s were those established by the Methodist Mission, and Indian religious organizations like the Arya Samaj and the Islamic Associations.

The colonial government followed a laissez faire policy in education. This meant that private (voluntary) committees were left to run both Indian and Fijian schools. The main difference was that the Indian schools were mostly run by Indian cultural and religious organizations, while the Fijian schools were run by local committees.

First and foremost, then, the phasing out of the voluntary system was considered important for making schools multiracial. Having state schools was also important for the government to have an effective control over the education system. Children of different ethnic origins could be brought together from an early age by phasing out the committee system and encouraging schools to amalgamate wherever there was duplication, the Commission had said.

During the debate on DPVI, the Minister for Social Services explained what was being done to make schools multiracial and to improve Fijian education. It still did not generate much interest and the policies were accepted with hardly any debate or criticism.

The majority of the schools in the country were (and still are) run by Indian religious and cultural organizations or Fijian village committees. Indians had made great sacrifices to establish their own schools, so they were justly proud of what they had achieved. This was despite the various obstacles placed before them by vested interests who did not want Indian children educated as that would put an end to their chief source of cheap

labour. With Independence, however, these voluntary agencies who ran the schools had outlived their use, which was evident from some of the problems highlighted by the Indian leaders themselves.

One major problem was duplication of facilities in certain areas and the resulting wastage of scarce resources while some other areas lacked facilities for education. Often in one area there would be three small schools close to one another. There would be one Fijian school and two Indian schools – one run by a Hindu organization and the other by a Muslim association. Amalgamating them would have not only brought more integration but it would also have been more cost effective and resulted in better standards because there was a shortage of qualified teachers. Many of these committee schools employed untrained people as teachers.

Several Indian opposition members had pointed out these problems even before Independence. Some of them had tried successfully to amalgamate schools in their areas. For example, the Bua Indian School and the Bua District School were amalgamated by the NFP Member of the Legislative Council under whose constituency the schools came (Leg. Co., 28 November, 1966: 950). Three years later, another opposition member gave the example of the Tagitagi area in Tavua where there were two schools opposite each other which he thought could be amalgamated (Leg. Co., 29 January, 1969: 98).

Such problems continued after Independence. In November, 1972, Opposition's whip, Karam Ramrakha informed Parliament that there was a lot of duplication of schools because of the segregated system that was in force. If these schools were reorganized, he said, it would save costs and remove racial barriers (Parliamentary Debates, 8 Nov. 1972: 1609).

Another sign that the voluntary agencies which ran schools had outlived their use was that until the 1950s the Indians were contributing to the costs of running the schools but with increased grants from the government towards schools there emerged evidences of misuse of funds. This was highlighted by various members of the opposition such as James Madhavan, Chirag Ali Shah and Karam Ramrakha (Leg. Co., 1969).

Ramrakha, who was also the president of the Fiji Teachers Union, was concerned that the committees might not pay the teachers the full salary grant that they received from the government and keep some of the money for other purposes (LC Debates, 25 April, 1969: 647). Similarly, another opposition member pointed out that the committees might not pay the parents of needy children the remission of fees that the government paid for them (LC Debates, 25 April, 1969: 648). It would have been wise to nip these misuses in the bud; the best way would have been to take over at least some of the schools, if not all.

Opposition members also complained about the growth of school fees collected in various ways, such as building grants. Government had increased grants to the voluntary agencies hoping that there would be a corresponding reduction in school fees but this had not happened (Leg. Co., 22 March, 1967:155-156 and 29 January, 1969: 102). This was a clear indication that as long as the voluntary system continued, costs would not come down.

Significantly, the one opposition member who spoke in support of these voluntary agencies which ran schools, rather than criticizing them, was Siddiq Koya, although earlier he also had spoken in favour of government running all the schools (LC Debates, 22 July, 1966:71). Vijay Singh, the Minister for Social Services in 1967, pointed this out. In agreeing with the opposition's criticism of the committees that ran schools, Singh said that they were only stating the obvious but he did not know what the Opposition expected the Government to do because earlier Koya had emphatically stated that 'the committees are masters of their own schools, they would manage [them] and levy building funds and admit students to their schools as they desired' (Leg. Co., 22 March, 1967:172).

Members of the Opposition other than Koya continued to highlight the problems in committee schools. Koya became the Leader of the Opposition towards the end of 1969. It would have been an ideal time for starting to take over some of the committee schools as there was implicit support for such a move from many members of the opposition. This was also the recommendation of the 1969 Education Commission.

The Education Commission offered as the solution to the various problems found in the committee schools the ending of the voluntary system and providing state schools. This would also have brought about more integration and reduced communalism as well as reduced costs of education for the parents. It would have further resulted in better standards. To begin with, the Commission recommended the phasing out of the voluntary system in primary schools and amalgamating schools wherever there was duplication.

The major recommendation for promoting multiracial education at the secondary level was the establishment of Government Junior Secondary Schools of high quality in carefully selected rural areas. At the same time, the Commission hoped that the Education Department would discourage the further proliferation of poor quality committee schools.

The government's long-term aim was to assume responsibility for committee schools if and when their managers sought integration into a state system. The Minister in charge of Education, Jonati Mavoa, agreed that eventually the government should aim at a wholly state system of

primary education but he was conscious of the fact that some of the private organisations might very well be reluctant to hand over their schools to the central government (Parliamentary Debates, Nov. 1970: 209).

The Opposition accepted without criticism the education policies outlined by the Minister. Speaking on the benefits of multiracial schools, one member of the Opposition pointed out that such schools would not only bring the children of various races together but they would also be more cost effective, as it would avoid duplication, while another stressed the importance of multiracial schools for nation building. Adi Losalini Dovi, a nominee of the Council of Chiefs, agreed with the opposition on the importance of such schools which she strongly believed was the answer to the problems in Fiji.

Unfortunately, Siddiq Koya, the new Opposition leader, seemed uninterested in abolishing the committee system and putting an end to communalism in schools. His priority in education seemed to have been to concentrate on policies which would bring him more electoral support. He obviously did not think taking over committee schools would prove popular with the different religious and cultural organizations that ran these schools. On the other hand, free education was an issue which had popular support, especially among the Indians, so he decided to champion that in the 1972 general elections, the first to be held after independence. 'Free, compulsory, primary education straight away. This is the only thing the party [NFP] advocated officially in the last election' Koya declared after the election (Parliamentary Debates, 2 June 1972: 712).

Free Education

The Opposition had brought up the question of free education in the Legislative Council even before Independence. In January, 1969 Mrs. Irene Jai Narayan, a leading member, introduced a motion calling for the immediate introduction of free and compulsory education (Leg. Co., January, 1969). It is not clear what prompted her to bring that motion, because a few days before that the Minister for Social Services had announced in the media the decision to appoint an Education Advisory Commission.

In introducing the motion, Narayan talked of the importance of multiracial schools where children would learn tolerance from an early age. She seemed to believe that free and compulsory education would make schools multiracial. What was needed for that was the wiping out of the voluntary system which fostered communalism. Mrs. Narayan's motion, moreover, revealed the lack of understanding of Indian leaders of the Fi-

jian educational problems. The major difficulty for Fijian people was not fees; many Fijian schools, unlike the Indian schools, did not charge fees. This was amply pointed out during the debate by the Fijian members.

Mr. Yarrow, a backbencher, gave the example of a Fijian school in Tavua, Nadelei Catholic Mission School, which charged only nominal fees where almost half its students and half its staff were Indians. The school committee was predominantly Fijian but Indian parents/guardians were invited to attend its meetings. Most of the money was raised by communal village effort. Yarrow stated: 'To the best of my knowledge no one has been turned away from Nadelei School because of the inability to pay fees and I think this would apply to almost every Fijian school using the same system' (Leg. Co., 1 Dec. 1969: 1508-9).

The problem for Fijians was access, as many Fijian villages were isolated. Often geographical features like mountains and rivers also made accessibility difficult.

However, the question that was worrying the Fijian leaders most was the under-achievement of Fijian children. It is this that they wanted the Education Commission to focus on. The NFP leaders were either unaware of or did not consider as important the issues of accessibility and under-achievement. The poor performance of Fijian children, however, was a serious national problem as it had the potential to cause resentment and ethnic tension. If after independence the Indians started occupying most of the important positions in the country because of their higher educational qualifications, it was sure to create resentment among the Fijian people. On the other hand, if the Fijians with lower qualifications were accepted for positions to keep racial balance in the civil service and other areas of national life, Indians were sure to resent it. Narayan, a teacher, seemed completely ignorant of this major educational problem which was worrying Fijian leaders. This was an indication of the gulf between the two communities that existed in colonial Fiji.

It had also been pointed out that although many Fijian schools had free education it was impossible to have compulsory education because of the geographical isolation of some of the villages and the associated difficulties the children faced in remote areas in getting to school. Many parents were reluctant to send their young children to school because of these problems. This resulted in many Fijian children starting school at a higher age than others.

Alliance Minister Vijay Singh (who was the Minister for Social Services before a reshuffle of the cabinet) pointed out that when A.D. Patel, the NFP leader, was the Member for Social Services his priorities in education were universal, not compulsory, education, and reducing the

cost of education. Universal education seemed to have continued as the priority with the Alliance Government. In 1968, K. S. Reddy, the Assistant Minister for Social Services, talked about how the Government was working towards achieving this aim by 1972 (Leg. Co., 3 Dec 1968: 352).

Significantly, Patel did not speak on the motion and the Opposition accepted the amendment moved by the Minister for Social Services: 'that this Council notes with pleasure government's intention to appoint an Education Advisory Commission to make recommendations about the development of Fiji's education system and recommends that the possible introduction of free and compulsory primary education at an appropriate date be included in the terms of reference' (Leg. Co., 29 January, 1969: 91). Vijay Singh congratulated Patel and Mrs. Narayan for accepting the amendment (Leg. Co., 29 January, 1969:100).

Unfortunately, the Opposition decided to make free education an election issue in 1972. Education and land were the two most sensitive issues in Fiji at the time of Independence. It would have been wise to solve these through negotiation rather than causing open controversy. But by then A. D. Patel had died and S. M. Koya had become the new leader of the NFP as well as of the Opposition. This change in leadership adversely affected the performance of the Opposition.

The issue of free education was again raised by the Opposition soon after the 1972 elections, in November 1972, when it again introduced a motion calling for free and compulsory education. In moving the motion, Ramrakha, a leading Opposition member, referred to the Education Commission and what it had to say 'on this important question' (Parliamentary Debates, 8 November, 1972:1606). The Commission said it could not recommend that primary education be made free or compulsory immediately because of the 'lack of suitably qualified teachers' (Parliamentary Debates, 8 November, 1972: 1606). But Ramrakha believed, quite correctly, that the problem of shortage of teachers could be overcome by reorganizing the schools as there was a lot of duplication.

Ramrakha did not, however, make it clear how they should be reorganised. The Education Commission had also recommended a reorganisation by taking over committee schools and amalgamating them wherever there was duplication. Ramrakha further noted that education was an issue with which the country could not afford to play politics, but admitted that 'in the last election this did become a severe issue between the two major political parties – the Alliance and the NFP' (Parliamentary Debates, 8 November, 1972: 1607). Understandably, he did not say that it was the Opposition which made it into an election issue.

The other major reason given by the Commission against the intro-

duction of free education immediately was that 'the considerable additional cost to government (about \$2.5m annually) would inevitably divert funds from other educational needs of even greater urgency' (Parliamentary Debates, 8 Nov. 1972: 1606). Ramrakha pointed out that the Leader of the Opposition had indicated a solution to this, which was 'greater taxation on the larger companies' like Carpenters, which were making, by their own admission, 'incredible profits' (Parliamentary Debates, 8 Nov. 1972: 1607).

In 1969, the Minister for Social Services, Jonati Mavoa, had stated that the Government had accepted in principle that primary education should be free and it was working towards that end. It was, however, clear that the cost of education would not come down as long as the schools were run by private organizations (Leg. Co., 29 January, 1969: 89-90). So what was important was having government schools to actually reduce the cost of education.

In December 1970 the Minister for Social Services had stated in Parliament that free education was something that newly independent countries tried to have but he believed it did not really help the needy or benefit the country. It was only done to catch votes (Parliamentary Debates, 21 December, 1970: 438). Giving examples of African, Middle Eastern and Asian countries which introduced free education, he showed that it had not really benefited the people because in these countries less than fifty per cent of the school age population attended schools.

The Minister thought what had happened was that they catered more for the children in the cities and towns, forgetting the rural population. 'Now this is not what we want to do in Fiji and our efforts should be directed more to helping the poor children first ... Not that we think those in cities should not be assisted; we think we should help first those in need of help most and then as we can afford it, extend the help to others' (Parliamentary Debates, 21 December, 1970: 439).

The Opposition's demand for free education seemed only a vote-catching device. This was evident from the fact that one of their members admitted that primary education did not cost much, particularly in government schools, but in the case of private schools costs were going up and people were finding it difficult to pay (Parliamentary Debates, 8 November, 1972: 1622). The problem was that there were very few Government schools. If the Opposition was genuinely concerned about helping the poor parents, then supporting the Education Commission's recommendation for a state system of schools would have been the answer.

Harish Sharma of the Opposition stressed that multiracial schools were as important as free and compulsory education. He noted that 'if one

were to analyse the racial composition of various schools, one would find that our schools are far from multiracial in character ... whilst the government ... is considering the provision of free and compulsory education, it should at the same time take positive steps to implement the question of multiracial education in schools' (Parliamentary Debates, 8 November, 1972:1622).

The Education Commission had a practical plan for reducing costs and at the same time promoting multiracialism in schools by the state providing primary schools. In due course they were to be made free but it did not consider it an immediate priority because of other more urgent needs such as wiping out communalism from schools and promoting more integration. Meanwhile it had recommended a progressive increase in the funds made available for remission of fees of indigent children.

In DPVI, which covered the first five years of Independence, the government had expressed its willingness eventually to take over all schools run by voluntary agencies if they so wished. The policy was dropped from DPVII. No reason was given. More importantly, no questions were asked by the Opposition. The Minister for Education later admitted that phasing out the voluntary system would have meant long delays in the introduction of fee free education (Whitehead, 1986: 6).

When free education became a political issue the government decided to introduce it gradually from 1973, resulting in the indefinite shelving of the policy of taking over of committee schools. The Opposition's suggestion of increasing taxation on larger companies was not taken for fear that it may send wrong signals to investors.

Fee-free education, which took priority over the introduction of a state system of schools, had mass appeal and could win (or lose) votes, but in reality it provided minimal financial relief to the poorer sections of the community. As the voluntary system continued the committees found ways of getting money out of the parents as had been predicted. The costs did not in any way come down and duplication and wastage continued which also affected standards.

The Alliance Government, also mindful of the real politics of vote gathering, was rail-roaded into introducing 'free' education rather than providing a state system of schools. The issue, however, had not attracted many voters to the NFP in the 1972 general elections and the Alliance had a comfortable majority. This was an ideal time to take over schools as many opposition members (though not its leader, Koya) had also spoken of the problems of the voluntary system. The failure of the government to act, entrenched communalism in schools.

Moreover, government did not have ultimate control over the

schools to implement its policies such as cross-cultural studies. The committees were still in control and they were not interested in these policies. In clamouring for free education after Independence, the Opposition NFP ignored other more important educational issues such as integration and cross-cultural language learning. Having a state system of schools would have not only helped to wipe out communalism by making schools multiracial in areas where there was a multiracial population; it would also have helped to implement the policies, such as cross-cultural language learning, for developing a distinct national identity.

Jone Naisara, who became the Minister for Education after the 1972 elections, stated: 'Government's declared policy [is] set out in DPVI ... and we will stick to it' (Parliamentary Debates, 8 November 1972: 1610). Unfortunately, government did not stick to it. In this connection, Whitehead noted that unlike a colonial government, 'a popularly elected Government had to be far more sensitive to the force of public opinion' (1986: 6). By not supporting the policies of the government, which were based on sound advice from the Education Commission, the Opposition contributed to the maintenance of communalism in schools.

One scholar blames 'the post-Independence leadership [which] lacked that decisive commitment to break from the shackles of the colonial education order, which was an important prerequisite for the creation of a genuine multi-ethnic order' (Baba, 1988:18). It is true that ultimately the fault lay with the government for not sticking to the sound policy it originally had, based on recommendations of the Education Commission.

Government and Opposition should have explained to their supporters that the priorities in education were universal education and reducing the cost of education, both of which could have been better achieved by having state schools. Abolishing fees, moreover, did not mean that education became free. Instead of explaining its position and sticking to it the government also allowed itself to be influenced by the opposition in this vital area. This was the reason for the continuation of communalism in schools. It is, moreover, believed that had 'there been sound education structures ensuring that children of all races were educated together at an early age, multi-racialism would not have floundered so easily' (Baba, 1988:18).

Cross-Cultural Studies

Since building a nation was seen as the main aim of education, the Commission recommended the teaching of a basic Fijian language course to non-Fijian students so that they would be able to understand and speak

the language. This was to help to integrate the population by developing a distinct Fiji identity and creating a national feeling in the children. The Commission also recommended cross-cultural studies to promote integration and pointed out that school subjects such as History and Geography should be used to foster a sense of national pride and promote national unity.

The Alliance Government, following its 'multiracial' policy, went a step ahead and decided to teach not only Fijian but Hindi as well to all children. The aim was to make the growing generation trilingual, with everyone able to converse in Fijian and Hindi with English remaining the medium of instruction. A distinct Fiji identity was hoped to be developed. This would have gone a long way in integrating the young population. Government, however, could not implement its policies satisfactorily because the voluntary system persisted.

Indian religious and cultural organizations that ran most of the schools were not interested in such a programme as they were more interested in promoting their own vernaculars. Apart from Hindi (for their own students, and not cross-culturally) some organizations, like Sangam and the Muslim League, wanted languages like Tamil, Telugu and Urdu in their schools. The parents also did not show any interest in cross-cultural language education. Nor did the teachers show any interest in cross-cultural language learning as they concentrated on examinations and examination results.

Adi Losalini Dovi, the Government Whip, raised her concerns in Parliament: 'I have often wondered whether we as a Government responsible for this country are really sincere in our efforts of bringing together a closer understanding of the races in this country'. She asked the Minister of Education when the language policy would be implemented because she felt that 'if we overcome the language barrier, then a lot more could be achieved in that way' (Parliamentary Debates, 10 December, 1973: 2026). K. S. Reddy of the Alliance agreed with her: 'Language, sir, will play a great role in moulding our multiracial society' (Parliamentary Debates, 10 Dec. 1973:2059). But only one opposition member, K. K. Singh, spoke in support of her (Parliamentary Debates, 11 Dec., 1973: 2122).

This was a criticism of the Government by none other than its own Whip. One would have expected the Opposition to pounce on that opportunity but it was not to be. This showed the low priority it gave to cross-cultural language learning. The Minister responded that the Curriculum Development and Advisory Section was preparing suitable course material and trying it out in selected pilot (primary) schools. The Minister fur-

ther stated that two types of language courses were being developed in Fijian and Hindi at secondary levels, 'a mother tongue course for those who speak the language and a second language course for those who do not'. It was hoped that the second language courses would promote better understanding among the various communities in Fiji. The Curriculum Advisory Board which had opposition MPs, senators and others, with the Minister as the Chairman, was to discuss the matter at its next meeting, the Minister maintained (Parliamentary Debates, 14 December, 1973: 2256).

A year later, the Minister for Education, Jone Naisara, again referred to 'the plea made by the honourable Government Whip', for cross-cultural language learning and said: 'I would like to emphasize that government is committed to a policy of better understanding among the various communities'. But he went on: 'It should be appreciated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that making the teaching of any vernacular language compulsory to children of another mother tongue can be [a] highly contentious, complex and sensitive issue in a multiracial society like ours' (Parliamentary Debates, 2 December, 1974: 1660). That was why it was important to have the co-operation of the Opposition to make it acceptable to all the communities.

When the Ministry of Education tried to implement cross-cultural language learning it had difficulty in finding suitable teachers. It was then decided to introduce it as a radio programme. In 1978 the Ministry of Education started teaching Fijian and Hindi cross-culturally as a school broadcast programme. Radio based lessons were developed. It unfortunately had a very short life span probably because the majority of the population seemed to have no interest in the issue. By 1982 the emphasis had shifted from cross-cultural language learning to each one learning his/her own mother tongue, as this was the priority of most of the committees that ran schools. The then Minister for Education, Ahmed Ali, supported these moves, especially by the South Indian and Muslim organizations, probably in the hope of winning more votes. Neither the Opposition nor the teachers' unions, examined the policy for fear of antagonising the communities involved.

The voluntary agencies running the schools were promoting these languages for their own reasons, ignoring the need of the nation, which was clearly cross-cultural language learning. The government again made the mistake of not sticking to its original policies and allowing them to be modified as it did not get the support of the Opposition for implementing them. Now over three decades later the language barrier between Fijians and Indo-Fijians continue.

The Fijian Educational Problem

The Education Commission noticed a wide disparity in educational development of ethnic Fijians in comparison with other races. It found that the quality of ethnic Fijian primary education was often low. Bridging the gap between ethnic Indian and ethnic Fijian educational achievement was important for bringing about national integration. Otherwise ethnic Fijians would be disadvantaged when it came to occupying positions of responsibility in the newly independent nation.

The Commission found that with a few exceptions, representatives of other racial groups were generally supportive of special measures for the improvement of ethnic Fijian education, although understandably not on a permanent basis. It was also found that ethnic Fijians were anxious to ensure that any such measure was not permanent, and that any measure taken should be phased out as the achievement gap narrowed. Any permanent discrimination in favour of ethnic Fijians was regarded as unworthy of the dignity of the ethnic Fijian people.

Improving the quality of primary education, especially in rural areas, was seen as the long term solution to the problem. This could be brought about through more government involvement and by setting up Junior Secondary Schools. In promoting measures that would help Fijian students to achieve better standards, the Commission cautiously avoided steps that could be interpreted as blatantly discriminatory. Instead, it emphasized the rural-urban dichotomy and recommended policies that would improve rural education. The Commission wanted to see a progressive increase in the funds made available to provide free and partly free places at secondary schools for children of indigent parents. Such an increase would do much to correct the disparity between the number of ethnic Fijian children at secondary schools and those of other races because it was mainly the former who lived in rural areas where ready cash was hard to come by. This recommendation was clearly aimed at helping ethnic Fijians but the Commission wanted the emphasis to be placed on need rather than on race so that it would not appear to be discriminatory.

The opposition had been rightly criticising the implementation of the limited free and partly free places in place in the 1960's. In 1969, A.D. Patel had pointed out that many deserving students in Nadi, whose parents could not afford to pay school fees, missed out on that. Another opposition member, Chirag Ali Shah, had also given similar instances from Ba and Tavua and the Minister in charge had promised to look into those cases. Such problems persisted after Independence, and Ramrakha, the Opposition Whip, gave the example of his own child who was offered

a free place though he had not applied for it.

The problems in implementation of these awards came to a head in the mid-1970s when government announced that only ethnic Fijian students would be given free and partly free places in schools. Ethnic Indian members in Parliament, on both sides, protested vehemently against the move and the government withdrew its decision and admitted that an error was made.

The incident proved how effectively Parliament could be used, to put pressure on the government, when decisions were made that were unfair to one particular community. Unfortunately, this was a rare example after Independence of making use of the Parliament to fight issues affecting Indians, with some unity of purpose, rather than being at logger heads on party lines. This kind of co-operation, which could have transformed Fiji society was, however, short lived as subsequent debate on the differential mark requirements by different ethnic groups to secure scholarships for USP, created an environment that was to put the Opposition as a confrontationist political party.

The Opposition Leader, Siddiq Koya, had, only a few months before the country became independent, stated that 'the only way I can see how we can solve these problems is to approach them as if they were national problems', and had given the assurance that 'as long as I occupy my chair, I shall do my best to see that they [the ethnic Fijian problems] are [solved] ... by joint consultation and we would give our fullest support to the Government' (Leg. Co., 15 June, 1970: 193). Actual formal behaviour of the Opposition, however, was totally the opposite..

The Opposition continued to attack Government policies on education. Yet, it continued with its rhetoric. Three years after Independence Koya reiterated that the problems facing the ethnic Fijian people were national problems, stating: 'we have already said words to the effect that the concern for the welfare of Fijian people is not the monopoly of the Alliance Government. It is a national problem and as such we have a duty to solve the problem, to do our best to contribute all we can to solve it and that is where we stand' (Parliamentary Debates, 14 December, 1973: 2325-6). Yet, at no occasion did the NFP provide any firm policy suggestion to the government. In October, 1975 during the debate in Parliament on Butadroka's motion calling for the repatriation of Indians from Fiji, Koya admitted that the Opposition did not agree with the Government's policy on education. Both the Prime Minister and the then Minister for Education wanted to know what exactly he opposed and what proposition he had. Koya's reply was vague: 'Sir, it is the objective [with] which, I think, both sides agree ... this is a national problem and it must be

achieved – but the method, Sir, we disagree with’ (10 Oct. 1975: 1152).

The ‘correct’ method – so the Opposition believed – was for it to implement when it came to power. To come to power, it had to demonstrate to the voters that the incumbent government had policies in place that were detrimental to the interests of the citizens. The Opposition did not consider policy amendment an issue. Nor did it consider the possibility of a non-partisan approach to education. For the opposition the issue was to replace those who were making policies. For this, every policy of the government in power, had to be confronted head-on. Conversely, for the government, the response had to be in like terms.

Earlier, the Government had put in place preferential policies for Fijian students for scholarships at the University of the South Pacific. The Prime Minister suggested that Koya was not sincere in his support for improving Fijian education because the Government’s educational policies were largely based on the recommendations of the Education Commission. The Opposition had neither criticised these recommendations nor suggested alternatives. It also did not ask for a review of the policies after six years as the Education Commission had recommended.

In 1976 a Senate Select Committee was appointed to look into the problem of absenteeism among ethnic Fijian children. That would have been another occasion to review the special measures as, coincidentally, it was six years after the policies were first introduced. But the Senate committee made no mention of a review of these policies. The Opposition did not demand any such review either. By 1977, the Opposition had politicised education so much that there was no possibility of education, much like the land issue, to be discussed outside the boundaries of national electoral politics.

The national education problem (that of lack of integration) and the ethnic Fijian education problem (that of relatively insufficient progress) continued without any attempt by any political party to provide in-depth analysis, or systematic reviews of the policies, or even sound policies. Education had become so politicised that no government dared introduce any far reaching change in the system.

Conclusion

Co-operation between government and the opposition in Fiji commenced only a few years before Fiji’s independence, and ended after political independence. A change in the leadership of the then Opposition – the National Federation Party – changed the approach to policy intervention in the country. This had a remarkable impact on the education sector.

Documentary evidence shows that the Alliance Government had intended to put in place policies that would have integrated schools in Fiji. At core of this, was the state taking over from the non-government groups, especially religious institutions, the responsibility for operating schools. The NFP, however, wanted the system of voluntary schools to continue. NFP ranked free education for all as of greater priority. But whether education could be free when educational institutions were run by non-state institutions that were free to levy a range of charges on students, was a matter that did not interest the NFP.

The NFP’s stand on free education within the then existing system of education, put pressure on the Government to introduce free education. This came at the cost of the government abandoning its policies of the state taking greater responsibility for providing education directly rather than through non-government institutions. The latter, comprising largely religious bodies, not only preferred to cater for the immediate interests of their communities, but also remained potential political constituencies which no political party could alienate. Thus, the voluntary system in education persisted. This stood in the way of the Government’s plan to introduce cross-cultural language learning in order to create a distinct Fiji identity in the growing generation.

Thus, neither could schools be integrated, nor could cross-cultural language learning be successfully introduced in Fiji. The result of this was that education failed to develop a distinct national identity and lay the foundation for the new multiracial nation that was needed if Fiji was to move out of the perimeters of racial politics.

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