

Leadership that Elevates

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Introduction

Writing just before independence, the scholar R F Watters gave a stern warning to the leaders of the major ethnic groups about the future of Fiji: ‘Little hope remains for Fiji unless all racial groups ...act now with vision, resolution and self-sacrifice to subordinate their narrow, sectarian interests to the interests of the country as a whole’ (1969: 269). Some years earlier, Joshua Rabukawaqa, quoting Disraeli in the Fiji Legislative Council, elaborated the difference between an outstanding leader and a mediocre one. Rabukawaqa said that it could be judged from the kind of equality that the leader provided for the people. ‘There are two kinds of equality. There is the equality that elevates and creates and the equality that levels and destroys. You give leadership to the one who has proved himself to the world to lead. He will elevate and create the others to enjoy the same status he has’ (Fiji Legislative Council Debates, 16 December, 1965: 653). Kevin Hince offers these criteria for assessing a leader: the important questions to ask, he says, are whether the person concerned wanted ‘personal power’ or was he/she doing ‘community service’; was he/she a ‘positive force for development or a divisive, destructive agent; a leader of men or manipulator’ (1991: 1). Futa Helu (1994) makes a similar distinction between leaders who follow the Socratic tradition of service and the Sophists. Socrates believed leaders should work for the good of the country unlike the Sophists who believed only in having personal power. The distinction that Michael Goldsmith draws between a ‘thoughtful’¹ opposition and a ‘confrontational’ one in the Westminster

¹ A ‘thoughtful’ opposition is defined as ‘characterised by consensus around the good and criticism of the bad; it justifies support where that is necessary or desirable, opposition where it is not’. A ‘confrontational’ opposition, on the other hand, attacks all government policies for the sake of attacking, their motto being ‘we oppose what you propose’. (Goldsmith, 1993).

system is a similar one, as a thoughtful opposition focuses on what is best for the country.

This paper suggests that in Fiji's recent history only two leaders at the national level provided enlightened leadership following the Socratic dictum of service to the country; these two were Ratu Mara and A.D. Patel. They both were willing 'to subordinate their narrow, sectarian interests to the interests of the country as a whole.' Mara and Patel wanted to elevate and create rather than to level and destroy. So they both were 'positive forces for development' while most of the others who came after them seemed to have been 'divisive ... agent[s]'.

It is further suggested that if Indian leadership failures (with the National Federation Party changing from a 'thoughtful' opposition to a 'confrontational' one) led to the breakdown of the Westminster system of government in 1987, it was the failure of an Indian leader again that at least partly contributed to the crisis in 2000 leading to the fall of the People's Coalition government.

Scholars who have written about governing multiethnic countries invariably talk about the importance of leadership. 'Consociationalism', which is recommended by Lijphart as the best form of government for such countries, involves co-operation between leaders of various ethnic groups for the good of the country. This requires a lot of give and take.

Helu believes that for democracy to work in small Pacific countries, leaders have to abide by the principles of Socrates rather than following the Sophists. This requires setting your personal ambitions and prejudices aside and working for the good of the country. Michael Goldsmith, on the other hand, sees having a 'thoughtful' opposition rather than a 'hectoring' one (1993) as important. That again stresses the importance of that type of leadership which requires the opposition to co-operate with the government when it comes to issues that are for the benefit of the nation.

John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century identified a common loyalty to a nation as the most important prerequisite for the successful governing of a multiethnic nation. Fiji lacked this at independence as both the major ethnic groups in the country, the indigenous Fijians and the immigrant Indians, had their primary loyalty to their community and identified themselves primarily with their ethnic groups rather than with the nation. Fijians, moreover, were not for Independence at all as they feared the consequences of the numerical supremacy of the immigrant Indians, once the colonial rulers left, ushering in democracy.

With an ethnic problem simmering in the background, most observers of the Fiji scene in the 1960s were unsure of the direction it would

take; many saw the future of the country as bleak (see Mayer, 1963 and Coulter, 1967). Writers agreed that the most important prerequisite for the survival of the country as a peaceful, multiracial nation was enlightened and selfless leadership. One writer even warned that if the leaders of the major ethnic groups did not act with foresight putting the country before their community, then Fiji might become ‘something like a Cyprus in the South Pacific’ (Watters, 1969:269).

In the 1960s, when Fiji became self governing and party politics started in earnest, fortunately the country enjoyed enlightened leadership from the leaders of both the major ethnic groups. Ratu Mara and A. D. Patel were both prepared to subordinate their narrow, sectarian interests to the interests of the country as a whole. This proved the ‘scaremongers’ wrong as it became clear that ‘the Federation Party leaders performed the Opposition role well’ (Norton, 2004, p.165).

With Patel’s death in 1969, however, the party he had founded and led to look after the welfare of the exploited people of all ethnic groups in the country slowly turned into an ethnic Indian party with no longer a clear ideology, resulting in the failure of the Westminster system in Fiji.

Leadership for Preserving Fiji Fijian

In the colonial days, the major concern of the indigenous Fijian people was ensuring that Fiji was preserved as a Fijian country (Mara, 1997, p.62). This was because there was a fear lurking in their minds that it might become a ‘Little India of the Pacific’ as Coulter (1942) had predicted. From the 1940s, because of the growing Indian population which overtook the Fijian population, this fear became acute. The Fijian people left it to their leaders, mainly the chiefs, the task of keeping Fiji Fijian. At the same time, the new leaders who were emerging from among the Fijian commoners articulated these concerns more openly. Two of the most vocal were Ravuama Vunivalu and Semesa Sikivou who both often brought out these issues in the Legislative Council.

Fijians often discussed these ‘problems’ in their villages (Manoa, 1979). This was the reason for their reluctance in even having multiracial schools. They feared that that would lead to the loss of Fijian culture as expressed by Sikivou and Vunivalu in 1959 (Legislative Council Debates, 19 June, 1959:279, 282). This also made them hesitant about independence, especially if it meant the democracy of one person, one vote.

At the time of independence some Fijians wanted the country to be handed back to the Fijian chiefs who had ceded it to Great Britain in 1874

rather than having a parliamentary democracy with rights for everyone, with the majority being in control of the government. Dr. Timoci Bavadra, who used to be the Assistant Director of Primary and Preventive Health Services in 1985, and later became the Prime Minister in the short-lived NFP/FLP coalition government of 1987, had come across similar concerns among the ordinary Fijian people even after independence and they were reluctant to practise family planning for fear that the disparity in numbers between the two major races would work to their disadvantage when they faced the Indian 'threat' (*Daily Post*, 25 July, 1992).

The colonial officials found the senior Fijian leaders, who were mainly the high chiefs, more open to change than ordinary Fijians. By 1963, Ratu Mara had become 'the undisputed leader of the Fijians' because of 'his intellectual ability'; he was the most 'progressive' among the Fijian leaders and the colonial administration found him important as a 'moderating force' (Norton, 2002:142-3).

Ratu Mara was, however, not the most popular among the Fijian people, and other leading chiefs did not always agree with him 'because of his conciliatory attitude to the Indian leaders' (Norton, 2002: 142). But because he was a paramount chief, the Fijian commoners did not question him and accepted his decisions 'as it was against Fijian tradition to question chiefs or go against their decisions. Ratu Mara and his fellow chiefs who became national leaders at independence persuaded their people to accept democracy with equal rights for everyone. The Fijian chiefs were prepared 'for the sake of Fiji's stability and economic advancement' to share power with other ethnic groups 'but not to relinquish it or to subordinate themselves to the will of others' (Ali, 1978: 153). The other Fijian paramount chiefs, while they were not happy with some of Ratu Mara's multiracial policies, were still prepared to give him a free reign because they knew that he would, ultimately, never do anything that compromised Fijian rights or marginalized the Fijian people in any way.

Rejecting Patel's call for a common electoral roll, Ratu Mara had made the views of the Fijian people clear just before the start of self-government. Fijians were very proud of their culture, and if they abandoned some of their culture, it would be to adopt the best of western culture, Ratu Mara said. Condemning Patel's constant criticism of the Europeans, he said: "Remove the 'buffer' as it were of European culture in Fiji and there will be conflagration because we will have to come to a decision which culture dominates in the country - will it be a Fijian culture or an Indian culture. Until we agree to a compromise to all these cultures there will be no peace in this country", Ratu Mara warned (Legislative

Council Debates, 16 December, 1965:662).

A major priority of the Alliance Party under Ratu Mara which was in power at the time of independence, therefore, was making the country integrated with a common identity and no major disparity in educational or economic achievements between the two major groups. As long as there was a disparity with the indigenous people lagging behind, there was the threat of Fijians becoming marginalized and the country becoming a little India of the Pacific. Fijian leaders, including Ratu Mara, were not going to let that happen. On the contrary, they would stop it at all cost as their main concern was to see that Fiji remained Fijian. The Fijians were not only concerned about their land rights and security in the country; they were equally concerned about the ethos of the country which they wanted to remain Fijian. European commentator Deryk Scarr stated the question was one of identity – ‘should Fiji promote a Fijian image or an Indian image?’ (Scarr, 1988: 117). This was a point the Indian leaders had to understand. The disparity in numbers was closing in with higher migration and lower birth rates of the Indians. So one of the major tasks for leaders of the country at independence was working to eliminate the educational and economic disparities that existed at that time and building a nation with a distinct Fijian identity.

At the time of independence, ‘the Big Four’ chiefs, as they were popularly known, dominated national politics. They were Ratu Edward Cakobau, Ratu George Cakobau, Ratu Penaia Ganilau and Ratu Kamisese Mara (all of whom were later knighted). They could speak with authority for the Fijian people because Fijians from every corner of the nation accepted their leadership unquestioningly and Indians also looked up to them as leaders of the nation. The Indian leaders also believed that if one of ‘the Big Four’ gave his assurance on anything that concerned the nation they could take his word because they worked as a team in the best interests of the nation and could make the Fijian commoners agree to their decisions.

As Joni Madraiwiwi (2004) noted, ‘together [the Big Four] assured the good governance of the Fijian people and the other citizens of Fiji for a considerable period. They were assisted by well-educated non-chiefly persons in their leadership’. In contrast, there was no one of comparable stature among the Indians, either before or after the death of A. D. Patel.

Safeguarding the Fijian Heritage

Simione Durutalo pointed out that it was ‘only a certain category of chiefs who mortgaged away our future by signing the so called Deed of

Cession' (1983: 12). But in 1970, in the Legislative Council Fijian members claimed that most of the ordinary Fijian people were united in their desire that Britain give back the country to the chiefs, rather than it becoming a multiracial democracy (LC Debates, 18 June, 1970: 242). In 1968, many Fijians were united in their anger against Indian leaders for attacking their chiefs; it was acknowledged (even by the Indian leaders) that the chiefs played an important role in containing ethnic tensions and averting conflict in 1968.

In 1977, it was the commoner Fijians who supported Butadroka and his ideology of 'Fiji for the Fijians', electing him to Parliament in the first general elections that year. When they realized the consequences of their actions (that it made the Indian dominated NFP win by default), a few months later in the next general elections they threw their support solidly behind the Alliance Party which was led by the Fijian chiefs. In 1982, the commoners gave a clear mandate to the chiefly led Alliance Party. In 1987, again a number of Fijians who had earlier supported the Fiji Labour Party withdrew their support as soon as it entered into a pre-election coalition with the predominantly Indian NFP. The Fijian people in general rejoiced at Rabuka's overthrow of the elected government. It was not just the eastern Fijians or the Taukei supporters but the majority of Fijians from all the provinces. The chiefs and the commoners were one in their wish that Fiji remain predominantly Fijian. So long as the politics of ethnicity prevailed, this was only possible if there was a Fijian-dominated government.

Martha Kaplan has noted that village Fijians linked Fijian paramountcy with chiefly leadership. During her field work, she worked with Fijians whose ancestors were deported in the colonial period both by British officials and by chiefly Fijian officials. 'Yet most nowadays are far more willing to cede leadership of the modern state to the descendants of those colonial chiefs than to consider any commonality of experience with the descendants of the indentured Indians' (Kaplan, 1988:109).

A lot of criticism was also directed at the chiefs who acquired power after independence. There was a reason for the predominance of chiefs, which was that most of the educated Fijians at that time were chiefs. This was the direct result of colonial policy which believed in educating only the sons of chiefs. So there were no facilities for higher education of ordinary Fijian children while the sons of chiefs were sent abroad.

David Robie has noted that 'power was not intentionally handed over to the partnership of [Fijian] chiefs and general electors in the Alliance' at independence though 'this group became an oligarchy' the chiefs

taking charge after independence was more the direct result of the education policy followed by the colonial government (1989: 208; see also Norton, 2002:143).

During most of the colonial period, the Europeans dominated in business and industry; they were also leading in professions like law, accountancy, medicine, and engineering. Soon Indians started replacing the Europeans in most of these areas as Indians gave high priority to education and made sacrifices to educate their children against several odds. Besides, there was the Gujerati community which had come as free migrants mainly to trade and who already had small businesses. They started competing with Europeans in business, and soon began replacing them, especially in the retail sector. Fijians meanwhile did not advance much in education or in business.

The Failure to Produce National Leaders

With the establishment of the regional university, the University of the South Pacific, in 1968 in Suva, tertiary education became available to all Fijian students who qualified to enter it. A new generation of educated Fijians was emerging who came from all the provinces and included both chiefs and commoners. However, USP failed to produce a new generation of leaders who were able to think clearly about the issues facing the nation. The most important problem facing the country was reconciling Fijian and Indian aspirations which would bring about genuine integration. Ratu Mara was the only leader who had considered this problem seriously and in the early years talked about it and had policies for achieving the goal. Unfortunately, others, like Butadroka and to some extent the NFP leaders, started pulling in the opposite direction.

It is often believed that the Fijian chiefs did not want any change so that they could hold on to power, and that the Fijian commoners did not want democracy. What the chiefs claimed to be working towards was gradual change so that they could preserve the major aspects of their culture rather than being overwhelmed by the other cultures present in the country. Unlike the colonial government, the Alliance government under the chiefs did not deny Fijian commoners educational opportunities in order to subjugate them. On the contrary, all Fijian students who qualified to enter university were given scholarships to pursue their tertiary education. This was an attempt to elevate them all to a higher level rather than to suppress them.

In the 1980s, many at USP took an active part in Fiji's party politics.

But no one identified the major problem facing the country which was that the NFP and the Alliance had become reduced to ethnic parties with no policies of its own, which affected the effectiveness of the Westminster system. Unfortunately, USP failed to produce any national leader, Fijian or non-Fijian, who could address the issues facing the nation. There emerged on the scene barely basic educated nationalist leader, Sakeasi Butadroka, who started appealing to ethnic loyalties of the indigenous Fijians which affected nation building.

Primordialism and Fijian Nationalism

From 1973 onwards, Sakeasi Butadroka directly started appealing to the primordial loyalties of the ethnic Fijians by preaching Fijian nationalism. His main slogan was 'Fiji for the Fijians' and his professed aim was to send the Indians away from Fiji. But the target of his attack was Prime Minister Ratu Mara who he claimed was 'selling' Fiji to the Indians. Butadroka also accused Ratu Mara of promoting policies which benefited only one region in Fiji, Lau. Ratu Mara was the high chief of Lau, the eastern group of islands, which was different from the rest of Fiji because of its strong Tongan blood connections; Lauans were more 'Polynesian' than the rest of the Fijians.

Butadroka worked on the anti-Lauan sentiment that already existed on the main islands, which he brought out into the open. He complained that all aid was going to Lau and gave the example of a power generator for rural electrification. When it was pointed out that his own province of Rewa also received one, he said that that was a small one compared to the one that was sent to Lau! (Parliamentary Debates, 24 December, 1973: 2439). Butadroka further complained that Lakeba, the Prime Minister's island had an airstrip. Charles Stinson, the Minister for Works, explained that Lakeba was chosen because of its central location. Butadroka also accused Ratu Mara of not implementing policies for the benefit of Fijians which Ratu George Cakobau, the highest chief of Fiji and the Minister for Fijian Affairs, wanted, and gave the example of the Fiji Institute Bill which Ratu Mara did not approve. While attacking Ratu Mara, Butadroka praised Ratu George and tried to suggest that the latter had the welfare of the Fijians at heart. Butadroka was trying to manipulate the ancient rivalries between the chiefs of Bau and Lau. Ratu Mara explained the reasons for rejecting the Fiji Institute Bill which was based on the Malaysian MARA Institute, the disastrous effect of which was a riot in Malaysia. The Opposition Whip, Ramrakha agreed with Ratu Mara and said that

Butadroka had his facts wrong (Parliamentary Debates, 14 December 1973:2299).

More than a decade after Butadroka started manipulating regional differences, Timoci Bavadra, the Fiji Labour Party leader, followed a similar line in his attack on Ratu Mara. He promised that under a Labour government national resource would be more rationally divided adding that 'the government resources poured into Lakeba are derived from wealth produced by others elsewhere in the country' (Scarr, 1988: 33). Like Butadroka again, Bavadra tried to play Ratu George against Ratu Mara. It was incredible that Bavadra was using Butadroka's tactics because their personalities were, by all accounts, worlds apart. Butadroka was an opportunistic politician who manipulated religious, ethnic and regional differences to influence the Fijian people and win support from them; whereas even those who did not agree with Bavadra (for example, Scarr and Thomson) stress that he was a simple, guileless person.

Bavadra talked of the dominance of the eastern region and how the rest of Fiji had to serve the interests of a few centers in the east (Scarr, 1988:33). In contrast, Ratu Mara had, while speaking on Development Plan Six (DPVI) soon after independence, advised that no community look at the plan and search for its own particular benefit. The idea was to distribute the benefits to all sections of the community, at the same time bearing in mind that the needs of certain sections are greater than those of others (Parliamentary Debates, 7 December, 1970:51). Never did he refer to the disproportionately larger share of state resources being directed at Lauan development.

Lal noted that at the FLP's first annual convention (1986), Bavadra had set the theme (1988: 53). For Bavadra and the Labour Party, the difference between the Alliance and the Labour parties was not just class, but the difference between the western provinces and the eastern provinces. They complained that while the western districts were the main producers of wealth for the country the eastern chiefs were ruling.

This again had to do with education. The highly educated chiefs were all from the east; the Provincial School Western was closed during the Second World War and was not reopened ever by either the colonial government of the Alliance Government. In contrast, the Queen Victoria School (QVS) continued to move from location to location (from Nasinu to Ra to Lodon) and be strengthened.

In the early years of the Alliance rule, most of the major developments were in western Viti Levu. The idea of spending more on the western division, to correct past neglect during the colonial period, seemed to

have continued throughout the 1960s (see Legislative Council Debates, December, 1969). Evidences show that some of 'the most expensive capital projects' went to the western region (LC Debates, December, 1967). However, the perception of western Fijians that western Fijians received disproportionately lower state resources, including employment in the civil service, compared to Eastern, particularly Lauan, Fijians, found affinity with Dr. Bavadra, a westerner himself. The Labour-led coalition accused the Alliance government of corruption. The example they gave was unequal regional development in education. They alleged that Lau received \$1.3 million over three years for its 14,000 people while Ba province received \$400,000 for its 59,000 Fijians. Besides, they claimed, most monies went to Mara's village of Tubou and surrounding areas. The Ministry of Fijian Affairs quickly denied the allegation, claiming that scholarship awards, half of the sum involved, were always based on merit (Robertson and Tamanisau, 1988: 49).

Lakeba had an early start in formal education with both the Methodist and Roman Catholic missionaries landing there first. So from the early days, the islands in Lau had been ahead of the rest of the Fiji group in formal western education. Lau Provincial School was not only one of the earliest provincial schools to be established; it was the only one to have English as the medium of instruction and in the early years it had an Oxford scholar, A.M. Hocart, as its headmaster (1909 Education Commission). It is not clear if this early start had given the province an advantage over other provinces when it came to educational achievement. In independent Fiji many educated Fijians hailed from Lau. Deryck Scarr noted that the Lau Provincial Council represented probably the best educated Fijians in the country (1988:112).

Bavadra emphasized regional differences in other ways also. Michael Howard has noted that when Bavadra became the Prime Minister, the Fijian ceremonies that were performed to celebrate the occasion were all done in the western dialect rather than in standard Fijian which is the Bauan dialect (1988: 232).

Policies such as these were leading to further divisions in the Fijian community. Mara had aimed to keep the Fijian community united. Uniting the nation was, however, a much more challenging exercise. While the first Leader of the Opposition, A. D. Patel, had good rhetoric on uniting the nation, as exemplified by his 1965 statement 'The aim and object of the [Federation] Party is to integrate the people of this colony in one nation' (LC Debates, 1965: 630) concrete examples of proposals that would unit Fiji are rare. So is the case with the ruling Alliance Party,

where projects that were aimed specifically at uniting Fiji were hard to come by.

Many of the academics at USP, both local and expatriate, took an active interest in Fiji's local politics. They should have been able to conclude that at least from 1977, the Westminster system had not been working well for Fiji as ethnicity became more important than policies. Some Indo-Fijian scholars sounded a note of warning against the continuation of ethnic politics and advised the Fiji Labour Party to increase its rural membership rather than go into a coalition with the NFP. But no Fijian scholar spoke about these issues dispassionately from a Fijian point of view. Professor Ravuvu was the foremost among those who took an anti-Labour stand, failed to objectively talk of Fijian fears and perceptions. Simione Durutalo, while rightly pointing out that the indigenous people were discouraged from thinking for themselves, also did not delve in national unity issues.

Fijian people in particular had been making their own decisions on the casting of their votes. In this, they were just as easily led by politicians and propaganda as any other people in Fiji or elsewhere. If one were to agree with Bain that the 'essence of democracy is choice' (1988: 215) then Fijians had been enjoying democracy for a long while. They supported Butadroka in the 1970s when they felt that Ratu Mara's multi-racial policies were benefiting the Indians more than the Fijians. Similarly, Rabuka was adored by the Fijian people for his anti-Indian stance. Fijians had the right to choose their government from the time of independence though some scholars, like Lawson, claim that there was no democracy because there was no change of government for seventeen years. But even the opposition admitted that the elections were free. Satendra Nandan, a deposed minister in the Bavadra government, wrote: 'During elections no one was imprisoned By and large, these elections were free and fair ... the political process wasn't corrupted' (2000: 13).

Ratu Mara and his Critics

Ratu Mara is much maligned, including accusation of murder (Connew, Bruce, 2001:73) by academics, in particular, local and expatriate. But even his greatest critics are not able to diminish the greatness of his achievements. Writers are also forced to admit, however grudgingly, his contribution (Bain², Harder, Robie). Ratu Mara's greatest challenge was

² Bain noted: 'The 1970 Constitution embraces all the conceptual protections for human rights and dignity that can be conceived to prevent man doing evil unto man, and

‘assuaging Fijian fears as well as addressing Indo-Fijian concerns ... Mara successfully balanced the competing demands of Fiji’s ethnic communities for much of his tenure in power’, Joni Madraiwiwi noted (2004).

Peter Thomson noted that Ratu Mara became the leader of Fiji because of his intellectual ability. Mara was also behind the formation of the South Pacific Forum in 1971 and ‘he argued strongly that the islands needed trade before aid if they were to survive economically’ (Robie, 1989: 208). Robie also acknowledged the important role Ratu Mara played ‘in establishing the region’s role and reputation abroad through his eloquence’ (Robie, 1989: 208).

Ratu Mara worked hard to get Indian political support, but this support could not rise beyond 10% at best. He did, however, have some notable support from the business community and the rural elite. Possibly this working relationship was the reason that even after the military coups of 1987 there was no civil war. Ratu Mara, of course, made sure that firearms were kept out of civilian hands as Christopher Harder³ has acknowledged, and the police remained unarmed.

All in all, the Fijian chiefly leadership, which was in national control from 1970 to 1987, kept Fiji stable and peaceful. Instability began when chiefly leadership was rejected by the voters in the 1987 elections. Unfortunately, the economy did not recover after the 1987 coup. The main reason for the lack of economic progress during this period seems to have been that the leaders, Rabuka and Qarase, both commoners adopted nationalist policies to consolidate their power positions, emphasising indigenous Fijian hegemony. Such policies, though helping them win electoral support, do not inspire confidence in the investor community.

From Manilal to Mahendra Chaudhry: Leadership Woes

Unlike the indigenous Fijians who had their hereditary chiefs, leadership had always been problematic for Fiji Indians, as Professor Subra-

it is entirely proper for Ratu Mara to take credit for being one of its principal intellectual architects’ (1989:134).

³ Harder wrote: ‘Whatever other criticisms had been levelled against the 17-year-old Government of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara... they had done a good job keeping firearms out of Fiji.... In particular they were tough on visiting yachties.... They were given no option – hand the weapons over for storage in bond until they left or head back out to sea immediately. The authorities had always feared what might happen in such a volatile society if people were able to arm themselves with anything more than sticks, stones and cane knives’ (1988: 159-60).

mani has observed (1995: 179). This was partly because the Indians who came to Fiji did not form a homogeneous community. They came from different parts of the sub-continent; spoke different languages, followed different religions and had different customs. While the majority had come as indentured labourers, there were others who had come as free migrants to farm and to trade.

Most of the people who came during the indenture period were illiterate. Challenging their European employers required an understanding of the laws and legal rights. There were very few among them with the potential to provide leadership to the community. The few literate ones like Totaram Sanadhyay and Sadhu Kuppuswami tried to do whatever they could to alleviate the suffering of their fellow migrants in a country far away from their homeland. However, it was difficult for anyone to assume leadership of the whole group because of the divisions among the Indians. This led to the emergence of sectional leaders who formed their own cultural and religious organizations.

Manilal Doctor, a lawyer from Baroda who came through Mauritius, could be considered as the first leader of the whole Indian community in Fiji. Totaram Sanadhyay described his arrival in Suva in 1912 as a 'seminal' event. What was more, the Fijians were almost as enthusiastic about his arrival in the colony and organised a grand reception for him (Sanadhyay, 1991). He was held responsible for the 1920 strike by the Indian workers. Unfortunately, because of some of his personal failings (see Gillion, 1977: 21), the administrators found it easy to find fault with him and arrange for his deportation. However, during his stay of a few years, he was able to provide leadership to the Indian community by fighting for their rights. In doing so he challenged the European vested interests and the colonial administration.

Patel and his Fight to Stop Exploitation

A. D. Patel was the most outstanding among all the leaders Indians in Fiji ever had. He remained the most important leader of the Indians for several decades, until his death in 1969, just before independence. He was a lawyer, like Manilal, who had come to Fiji in 1928. He soon earned a name as an eloquent speaker and a brilliant advocate but he did not make a great impact as a politician (he was defeated at the polls twice⁴) until af-

⁴ The years following Manilal's departure produced some leaders, like Pandit Ajodhya Prasad, B D Lachman and Vishnu Deo.

ter, he joined hands with Swami Rudrananda, a Hindu monk who had come to Fiji at the request of the Sangam, the South Indian cultural organisation, and started working for the betterment of the sugarcane farmers after he and Rudrananda destroyed the Fiji Kisan Sangh.⁵ Together they formed the farmers union, the Maha Sangh.

As the influence of the Kisan Sangh declined, the Maha Sangh influence increased and Patel's popularity grew. It later became the backbone of the Federation Party (later known as the National Federation Party). Patel, thus, became the founder of the first political party in Fiji and remained its leader till his death in 1969. During his leadership, although the party was a predominantly Indian one in composition, its policies were secular. He was working to improve the lives of the poor people (mainly the farmers) and he was fighting against exploitation of any kind by anyone, be it the colonial government, the CSR Company or the Fijian establishment. Patel was fearless and highly principled and even his opponents appreciated his sincerity and commitment to his ideals. Patel saw the Fijian commoners also as victims of exploitation and genuinely wanted to help them as well just as he wanted to help the downtrodden Fiji Indians. At the time of his death he seemed to have been formulating his policies for helping the workers at the Vatukoula goldmine, who were predominantly Fijian, who were victims of exploitation by the Australian Emperor Gold Mining Company.

Patel had already started co-operating with Ratu Mara from the time the membership system was introduced in 1964, paving the way for self-government. After the by-elections of 1968, this co-operation on issues of benefit to the nation strengthened. Unfortunately, Patel died a year later. The 'Indian Fijians never recovered from the death of their leader' (Nandan, 2000: 136). In paying tribute to Patel at his death, Ratu Mara noted: 'As the first Leader of the Opposition, he set a standard of dignity, of eloquence and of courtesy in the finest traditions of Parliamentary form of Government which we have inherited' (LC Debates, 21 November, 1969). Ratu Mara further noted that there were deep divisions between Patel and himself, between the Government members and the Opposition under Patel, but all of them respected his sincerity and the devotion to the cause for which he fought.

Siddiq Koya who succeeded Patel also stressed how dignified Patel was and how he did not let anything lower the dignity of the House. He further noted how Patel helped to emancipate a large number of people in

⁵ For more about Swami Rudrananda, see Gaunder (2007: chapter 5).

Fiji and as counsel for cane farmers often accepted a brief without fee. Koya concluded that 'with his abilities, knowledge and quality he could have amassed a fortune and lived a leisurely life, oblivious of the manner in which people around him were treated, lived and died or alternatively turned into an acquiescent conformer and won the favours of those in power for extra prestige and benefits. He, however, chose the painful path of sincere, dedicated service' (Legislative Council Debates, 21 November, 1969).

It was Patel's sincerity in his dedicated work that set him apart as a great leader. A proof of his sincerity was his willingness to admit when he had made a mistake and make amends. So in 1968, when he realized that he was wrong in challenging the Fijian chiefly system, he started a dialogue with Ratu Mara to resolve their differences and work towards self government. Ratu Mara noted that it was Patel's assurance that the Fijian ownership of land, whether it was native or crown, would not be questioned that made Fijian leaders agree to self government.

When Patel was the NFP leader, he always emphasized the need to give priority to indigenous Fijian rights as he believed that as original settlers they were 'first among equals'. He also believed that 'in a democratic state common good [should prevail] over personal greed' (Legislative Council Debates, January, 1969: 130). He further noted, quite prophetically, that 'if we take a moderate and reasonable attitude and give little in time which might satisfy the other side, it would be far better and far more sensible than what we may be compelled and we may feel is too much if it comes too late' (Legislative Council Debates, January, 1969: 132).

NFP after Patel

The co-operation between government and opposition, started after the by-elections of 1968, continued under Koya who succeeded Patel. Fiji had a smooth transition to independence. The cordial relationship that developed between Koya and Mara, however, was different from the co-operative working relationship that Patel and Mara had. Koya became close to Mara on a personal level and not as the leader of one segment of the country, because he seemed to have no clear policies for the group he represented. Mamak (1978) pointed out this problem.

In the 1972 general elections, the NFP lacked an ideology of its own and borrowed the Alliance slogan of 'Peace, Progress and Prosperity' (Mamak, 1978:165). Mamak also noted that the NFP failed to secure Fi-

jian candidates for many of the national seats, let alone the Fijian communal seats. After independence, Koya was also not willing to make concessions and compromises to accommodate the other group, especially in education. After the 1972 general elections, Koya led a walk-out of the opposition members protesting against the Chief Justice, a move which was condemned by most government members. This seemed to have marked the turning point as after that the opposition slowly changed from being a thoughtful one to a confrontational one.

After independence, Prime Minister Ratu Mara twice offered to have a coalition government/government of national unity, but both times the offer was turned down by the opposition NFP. There was not even an attempt to discuss the proposal before the offer was turned down.

Unlike Patel, who had clear policies for the party, under Koya the party lacked a coherent policy. One reason for this was that soon after Patel's death the country had achieved the major things Patel had been fighting for which were an end to colonialism and exploitation of farmers. The country gained independence and the farmers received a better deal and their exploitation was over with the CSR withdrawing from Fiji.

What Koya failed to appreciate was that independence meant different problems, and one of the most important was bringing the two major races together. Although in his early years as the leader Koya gave the impression that he was sincere in his concern for improving the position of the Fijians in the country, especially in improving their educational achievement, when it came to implementing these policies he was not supportive.

Koya also turned sugar into a political issue. There was the question of freehold land owned by the CSR which reverted to the crown after the departure of CSR. Patel had assured that the ownership of land, be it crown land or native land, would not be questioned at all. But the opposition under Koya advocated the sale of the CSR land to sitting tenants. He also did not co-operate with Ratu Mara in extending the native leases under ALTA from ten to thirty years (rejecting it as not long enough) which led to the split in the NFP in 1976. There was also the question of common roll. Although Koya kept up the demand for this system of election, he did not work to create a situation where common roll would be possible by working to eliminate educational, economic and land disparities between Fijians and Indo-Fijians. He also did not support the exploited mineworkers in Vatukoula, who were mainly Fijians. If Koya had supported the mineworkers it would have also brought the NFP the ethnic Fijian support to make it a genuinely multiracial party.

Koya also lowered the dignity of the Parliament by indulging in personal attacks (e.g. his attacks on Len Usher, Stinson, Falvey etc.). Perhaps the worst example was on 27 June 1974, when he produced two nooses in Parliament and asked two Indian members on the government side to hang themselves. The combined result of all this was that rather than promoting unity and stability he generated conflict and unrest. Soon more divisions emerged. Although he often said that as Leader of the Opposition he was the alternate Prime Minister, he did not try to deliberately get rid of the Fijian-dominated Alliance government, as his successor, Jai Ram Reddy, did. Koya and Reddy were both Fiji-born, unlike Patel, but they did not realise that democratic outcomes for Fijians was only acceptable if they won.

The misfortune of the Indo-Fijians was that their leaders in the 1970s and 1980s did not focus on the major challenge the country faced after independence, which was reconciling indigenous Fijian fears with the aspirations of the Indians. This was because those who came after Patel did not have a national outlook. Their narrow outlook led to ethnic polarization (see Gaunder, 2007: 90-91) rather than integration and all the associated problems.

The greatest failure of NFP leadership after Patel was its inability to present itself as a viable alternative government by promoting policies different from that of the government. So it could not provide the electorate with a choice except an ethnic choice. Therefore, it could not compete for office in Fiji's racially volatile environment. This was all more regrettable because the Federation Party began as a strong and effective opposition and continued in that vein (for several years) before slowly becoming reduced to an ethnic party. In the mid 1980s, it became defunct for all practical purposes necessitating the emergence of the Fiji Labour Party (FLP).

The FLP, though it became predominantly Indian in composition after the 1987 military coups, still followed policies which were relevant to the whole nation and not just meant for any one community. This helped the FLP to get elected again, in 1999, twelve years after the first coup, which had overthrown the labour party led coalition government.

Chaudhry's 'Arrogance'

Mahendra Chaudhry, who became the first ethnic Indian Prime Minister in 1999, was similar to Patel in that he did not think in terms of Indians; had a clear ideology; and wanted to make a difference by improving the lot of the common man/woman. His major problem was his style of

leadership, which was often described as ‘arrogant’ and ‘dictatorial’ (Connew, 2001:76; Field and Baba, 2005: 61, 67).⁶ Teaiwa described Chaudhry’s leadership style as ‘abrasive’ (2001: 31). One New Zealand journalist, however, found it difficult to believe that ‘the powerful in Fiji [were] so abysmally intolerant that the brashness of a single Indian [would] lead to a coup’ (Connew, 2001: 76). He wondered if it was something else. Even if it was something else, the fact that the ‘powerful in Fiji’ were able to use ‘the brashness of a single Indian’ to muster enough support to overthrow the government showed a major leadership lapse on Chaudhry’s part, and demonstrated clearly the depth of democratic values those behind the overthrow had.

The main difference between Patel and Chaudhry was that the latter lacked the humility of the former who had the moral courage to admit that he had made a mistake when he realized it as in 1968 (see Gaunder, 2007). The lack of humility made Chaudhry refuse to listen to any advice from anyone. He was a great contrast to Patel who had two close advisers in Swami Rudrananda (see Rao, 2005: 122) and S. B. Patel (Mara, 1997: 74) whose views he valued.

Chaudhry would have done well if he had sought the advice and guidance of Ratu Mara. Ratu Mara was not only the President and elder statesman of the country but he had also helped Chaudhry become the Prime Minister by advising the Fijian parliamentarians like Adi Kuini and Poseci Bune to accept Chaudhry as the Prime Minister. Chaudhry himself had acknowledged Ratu Mara’s help on assuming leadership of the country. Ratu Mara could have given him sound advice on how to deal with issues that could have been used to mobilise emotions of Fijians. Instead of tactfully dealing with, or even avoiding, issues that would cause controversy Chaudhry played right into the hands of his opponents who were waiting for any opportunity to discredit him. In the final analysis, it was leadership failure which contributed to the fall of the People’s Coalition Government in 2000.

⁶ Chaudhry, though not communal in his emphasis, also did not have a national outlook until he became the FLP leader. As a trade unionist his priority had been the workers he represented, irrespective of ethnicity, but in doing that he did not consider what was best for the nation, becoming too demanding, over the years, on behalf of the unions he represented. For example, in the early 1980s, when the government was reluctant to implement the Nicole and Hurst recommendations which benefited mainly the highly paid workers or ‘labour aristocrats’, Chaudhry’s militancy won but it had adverse effects on the nation and eventually led to a split in the union movement (see Howard, 1987: 116).

Conclusion

The political problems in independent Fiji seemed to have started when the opposition NFP changed from a 'thoughtful' and effective opposition to a 'confrontational', ethnic one. Later, it became reduced to a nominal opposition which affected the functioning of the government since a strong opposition is imperative to keep the government on its toes.

The Fiji experience proves the important role leaders play in determining the fate of a small, developing nation and its people. To make democracy work in a small, multiethnic country like Fiji, enlightened leaders with foresight are needed who can put national interest before their personal ambitions and egos. Fiji was fortunate to have had such leaders in Ratu Mara and A. D. Patel. The absence of such a leader after Patel among the Indo-Fijians, who would co-operate with the Fijian-dominated government of Ratu Mara as Patel did, or of a Fijian leader who could cooperate with an Indian dominated government, led to the dream of a 'multiracial' Fiji with equal rights for everyone, remaining elusive. The importance of enlightenment and statesmanship in leaders of a small, multi ethnic nation to make democracy work cannot be overemphasized. Fiji became the envy of the outside world at the time of Independence because of the outstanding leadership she was fortunate to enjoy at that time. The future for Fiji will remain bleak until she is able to produce such great leaders again.

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