



Identity Crisis among the Fiji Indians

Satish Nand

Assistant Lecturer

The University of Fiji, Samabula Campus, Suva

Fiji Islands

Email: satishn@unifiji.ac.fj

Abstract

Belongingness to a place infuses power and raises self-worth for individuals. Realizing that the world is forever evolving and humans traverse universally in an effort to find comfort, conflicts arise when cultural values collide with modern ideologies. Fiji, a small island nation in the South Pacific continues to battle racial melodrama while the exotic race (Fiji Indians) subsequently look for a place they can call home. This paper intends to discuss the 'Vulagi' (Visitor) state of Fiji Indians in Postcolonial Fiji and explore the sentiments of fellow Fiji Indians in relation to their belongingness to Fiji in Literature written by the colonized Indians.

Key words: belongingness, racial, self-worth, postcolonial, colonized

Fiji, an island nation in the Pacific, has gone through a very rare population transition in the last two centuries. It is a multiracial country which boasts a peaceful coexistence of many races in this modern era. After the native Fijians (known as the Itaukeis), the Indo Fijians comprise the second largest ethnic group. A large number of the Indo Fijians consist of the descendants of the indentured labourers (known as the Girmitiyas) who were brought to Fiji as labourers from India in early 1870's while a few are the descendants of free migrants. Out of the Indo Fijian population, majority are of the Hindu faith while a small portion consists of Muslims and Christians.

A small portion of the Indo Fijian population can be classified as wealthy while the vast majority are workers and peasant farmers. Some Indo Fijians are among the poorest population. Indo Fijians do not have any default land rights as the native Fijians or better known as Itaukeis. The Itaukeis get a birth right on land owned by their 'Mataqali' (land owning clan). The Indo Fijian farmers lease agricultural land

from Itaukei landowners and get displaced upon the expiry of the lease. This makes the Indo Fijians landless and nomadic, thus, resulting in identity crisis. They lose the sense of belongingness and their relationship with the Itaukeis get fractured time and again.

Living with a status of a visitor (The Itaukeis refer to the Indo Fijians as 'Vulagi' or 'Kai India') in a place that was chosen as their home by their ancestors. This reality creates hardships and anxiety among the Indo Fijians. They are often politically marginalized and victimized. This is evident in the 1987 and 2000 coups when a lot of Indo Fijians were beaten and raped, their property looted and damaged while the community was left with deep scars and trauma. This triggered mass migration of Indo Fijians.

Many Indo-Fijians have left Fiji and resettled in the developed Pacific Rim countries, especially Australia. In the wake of this secondary migration, Indo-Fijians have

realized that their social and cultural distance from subcontinental Indians is too great to be narrowed by a shared ethnicity. In the process, they have developed a Pacific identity and have constructed a transnational space around Fiji as the new center largely excluding the cultural hearth India. (Voigt-Graf)

'Kai India' is a name given by the itaukeis to the indo Fijians which basically means 'the natives of India'. The mention of the name India itself reflects that the native Fijians will forever have the feelings that the indo Fijians are people from a different country and do not belong to Fiji. This feeling will continue to inhibit in the future native generations of Fiji although it has been 141 years since the arrival of Indians in Fiji. Some believe that indo Fijians do not have that traditional link to the land, sea and nature that should give them a sense of belongingness to Fiji. But the cultural aspects and beliefs do not justify the wavy relationships between the itaukeis and the indo Fijians. It is imperative to recognize indo Fijians within their cultural proximity rather than in a very ethnocentric manner.

Our values are grounded with the relationship we have with the land, the oceans and the heavens: we have the plants, animals to signify this relationship that enables us to maintain harmony and balance. Indian-Fijians have no connection to these things that mean a lot to us as Pacific people. They argue that they have been in Fiji for 140 years, but there is no study to signify the specifics around lifestyle: the way we look and the way we do things. (*NZ's Fijian-Indians Want to Be Recognised as Pasifika, Not Asians* | RNZ News)

This stereotype views of the modern pacific islanders disregard the contribution of the other races on their island. In reality, harmony and balance should be more of an individual choice rather than a communal objective that disregards other races. Some fail to realize that indenture system did a lot for Fiji in terms of business, trade and development and the indo Fijians deserve a respectful recognition as a rightful citizen of Fiji. The 2013 constitution of the Fiji Islands declare that anyone born in Fiji will be known as Fijian. There was a huge backlash from the

itaukei community when this constitutional change was about to take place. Thus, from 2013, constitutionally, the indo Fijians (and other races born in Fiji) became Fijians, which did not go down well with some radical itaukeis. The permeable in the 2013 constitution of the Fiji Islands clearly states that:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF FIJI,

RECOGNISING the indigenous people or the iTaukei, their ownership of iTaukei lands, their unique culture, customs, traditions and language;

RECOGNISING the indigenous people or the Rotuman from the island of Rotuma, their ownership of Rotuman lands, their unique culture, customs, traditions and language;

RECOGNISING the descendants of the indentured labourers from British India and the Pacific Islands, their culture, customs, traditions and language; and

RECOGNISING the descendants of the settlers and immigrants to Fiji, their culture, customs, traditions and language, DECLARE that we are all Fijians united by common and equal citizenry. (Project)

The current government of Fiji has worked on the equal citizenry aspect of the constitution of the Fiji Islands which gave some relief to the indo Fijians. The previous three constitutions of the Fiji Islands did not recognize indo Fijians as equal citizens, thus, depriving them of certain political and social standings.

The act of discrimination has always been present in the Fijian societies without an attempt to end it. This simply means that the stereotyping of the two major races in Fiji will continue because it dominates the respective societies without being addressed. It's no denying that the itaukeis and the indo Fijians are different physically, religiously and in a lot more different aspects but in a global context, this should be considered a strength rather than a cultural loggerhead.

The Fijian-Indian problem is most difficult. The Fijian discriminates against the Indian.

There is a greater degree of intermingling and intermarrying of the Fijian with other smaller ethnic groups in the colony than with the Indian, nor does the Fijian appear to resent the presence of the former on cultural grounds as he has done almost from the beginning in the case of the Indian.(Cato 14)

The itaukeis' have always been quite sensitive about their land. Land has been an issue that has been debatable ever since Fiji gained independence. The indo Fijians do not have any cultural rights to any land as the itaukeis have. The only pieces of land that the indo Fijians can rightfully claim is the freehold land which they buy. It was evident that during the 1987 and 2000 coups in Fiji, the indo Fijians were victimized since the radical itaukeis thought that the indo Fijians will claim their land from them. Cato also believed that Fijians never really accepted indo Fijians as a rightful native of Fiji (18). The itaukeis viewed indo Fijians as individualistic and misers who have no sense of belonging to a particular place and were culturally weak. However, it was evident in Cato's research that the primitive mindsets of the itaukeis are now evolving with modernization and education.

Fiji has gone through a lot of transformation: be it political, social or economic. The developments in trade and tourism has led the current government of Fiji to look away from racial issues ad focus on an inclusive and multiracial society. The 2013 constitution of Fiji, which is considered the supreme law of this island nation promotes peace, progress and prosperity based on merit rather than race. Consideration is given to the itaukeis in certain areas like education and business but without depriving other races as well. The modern Fiji has witnessed many achievements of individual Fijians in sports, education and business. Hopefully, the coming generations find a more tolerant and just Fiji.

Works Cited

Cato, A. C. "FIJIANS AND FIJI-INDIANS: A CULTURE-CONTACT PROBLEM IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC." *Oceania*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1955, pp. 14-34, doi:10.1002/J.1834-4461.1955.TB00655.X.

NZ's Fijian-Indians Want to Be Recognised as Pasifika, Not Asians | RNZ News. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/439637/nz-s-fijian-indians-want-to-be-recognised-as-pasifika-not-asians>. Accessed 15 Aug. 2021.

Project, Comparative Constitutions. *Fiji 's Constitution of 2013*. 2019.

Voigt-Graf, Dr Carmen. "Transnationalism and the Indo-Fijian Diaspora: The Relationship of Indo-Fijians to India and Its People." [Http://Dx.Doi.Org/10.1080/07256860701759956](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07256860701759956), vol. 29, no. 1, Taylor & Francis Group , Feb. 2008, pp. 81-109, doi:10.1080/07256860701759956.