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### **Indo-Fijians in Fiji: Their Acceptance to Pacific Way of Life and Retention of their Cultural Heritage**

The proposed paper is germane to the journey of the Indians since they first stepped into Fiji in 1879 and beyond. The people from India, when they were brought to Fiji, it was not out of their own choice but was out of compulsion during the period of Imperial rule or the British Raj in India. Now, their generations are Indian Diaspora in Fiji, called as Indo-Fijians. They later stayed back in Fiji out of their own choice and others joined them in Fiji with prospects of business and trading. The others had nothing to do with the Indentured system. They accepted the pacific way of life and adjusted in the Fijian society and yet preserved their cultural harmony and traditions.

Indians are settled in almost everywhere in the world in every corner. And, Fiji has its own significance as well because it's of the countries in the world apart from India itself where Indians are in large numbers (have been in majority at times) and where they have played a major role in their country of residence. Indo-Fijian culture means more than Indians living in Fiji. It is a unique blend of beliefs and customs that developed over centuries out of remarkable historical circumstances.

The present study is a culmination of working in the Indo-Fijian and Fijian society. And study over their complex yet mutual relationship and understanding that has been for over a century now. The statehood of Fiji lies in the ties built by both communities on socio- cultural grounds. The current developments in Fiji are indicating loosening of those ties. Unless the socio- cultural expressions and practices are not improved, steps of sharing of political, legal and economic ties between the two groups would not bring a permanent stability.

Keywords: Indentured System, Indo-Fijians, Indian Diaspora, Sugarcane plantation, Fiji Coups, Indians in Fiji, Giritiyas, Indian Indentured Workers, Leonidas.

## **Indo-Fijians in Fiji: Their Acceptance to Pacific Way of Life and Retention of their Cultural Heritage**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Diaspora: Greek verb “to disperse”: *dia* (through) and *speirein* (sow/scatter); The migration of a community through forced or self-willed exile and the efforts of that community to recreate “home” in new geographic spaces; Diaspora implies exile or bondage and the promise of return.

“The term “Diaspora” is a signifier not simply of trans-nationality and movement but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement .... Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place”

Even though, there are a certain limitations to the specificity of the concept of Diaspora, it has been broadly employed in the analysis of emigration and settlement of people beyond the boundaries of their homeland. Retention of the cultural identity in the host society is another important parameter of the concept Diaspora. The Indian Diaspora is a generic term to describe the people who migrated from territories that are currently within the borders of the Republic of India. It also refers to their descendants. The Diaspora is currently estimated to be over twenty million (Ministry of External Affairs Report), composed of "NRIs" (Indian citizens not residing in India) and "PIOs" (Persons of Indian Origin who have acquired the citizenship of some other country). The Diaspora covers almost every part of the world.

The table below shows the migratory patterns of the Indians during the colonial and postcolonial periods-

### Years of Migration and Percentage of Indian Population

COUNTRY	YEAR	COUNTRY	PERCENTAGE
Reunion	1829	Mauritius	70
Mauritius	1834	Guyana	50
Guyana	1838	Fiji	48
Trinidad	1845	Trinidad	41
Jamaica	1845	Surinam	35
Martinique	1854	Nepal	23
Guadeloupe	1854	Reunion	15
Grenada	1856	Bangladesh	11
St.Lucia	1858	Malaysia	9
South Africa	1860	Guadeloupe	8
St. Vincent	1861	Singapore	6
Surinam	1873	Sri Lanka	6
Fiji	1879	South Africa	3
East Africa	1895	U.K.	18
Seychelles	1899	Pakistan	17
Singapore	1895		
Burma	1852		
Malaysia	1895		
Canada	1875		
U.K.	1955		
U.S.A.	1965		
Australia	1973		

Source: Parekh, Bhikhu (1994:8) Table 1

The proposed topic is germane to the journey of the Indians since they first stepped into Fiji in 1879 and beyond. The people from India, when they were brought to Fiji, it was not out of their own choice but was out of compulsion that may have been intrinsic or extrinsic during the period of British regime in India. Now, their generations are Indian Diaspora in Fiji, called as Indo-Fijians. They later stayed in Fiji out of their own free will and choice and others joined them in Fiji with prospects of business and trading and who had nothing to do with the Indentured system. They all accepted the pacific way of live and adjusted in the Fijian society yet preserved their cultural harmony and traditions living side by side with the fellow Fijians. Fiji was explored by the Dutch and the British and it was a British colony until 1970. The British occupation lasted for almost a century. It is under the British rule the 'Indian Indentured Labour' was brought from India to Fiji in large numbers.

The first of the sailing ships taking the Indian workers to Fiji, the *Leonidas*, docked in Fiji on 15 May 1879 with 463 persons. The last of 87 ships, the *Sutleg-V*, arrived

there on 11 November 1916. When the Indentured system was finally terminated after the considerable opposition in India because of the inhuman treatment meted out to the indentured Indians, a total of almost 61,000 persons were reported to have been transported to Fiji. About 75% of these Indians had been recruited from what are now called as the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in India, and the remaining 25% from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. They had been taken there to work for assigned employers on a five-year contractual agreement. This was referred to as a *girmit* in the popular parlance of the illiterate Indian Labour, who soon came to be referred to as *girmitiyas*. Their descendants now form the second largest (44% as per 1996 census) ethnic group in Fiji. After the contractual period, they were free to move to another employer, or work for themselves. At the end of ten years in the Islands, they were entitled to a free passage back to India if they so desired. But most of them neither returned to India nor remained in the plantations to which they had been assigned initially. Instead, they preferred to settle down wherever they could find land to cultivate on their own with the new skills that they had acquired. Fijian law dictated that non-Fijians could not live in Fijian villages. This law made for segregation between the Fijians and Indo-Fijians. Indo-Fijians had to create their own communities or move to the coastal towns. These towns later became centers of commerce and trade.

Although relations between the Indo-Fijians and Fijians have improved since 1988, there is still resentment and anger on both sides (which is more or less politically motivated). The flight of Indo-Fijians after the coup resulted in the loss of over one-third of the nation's doctors, one-half of its lawyers, and a great number of teachers and nurses.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The migration of a sizeable Indian population to the Asia-Pacific islands of Fiji has a bigger meaning than just the physical movement of people from one place to another. It refers to the birth of a new blend of customs and beliefs over a period of time. Indo-Fijian culture means more than Indians living in Fiji. It is a unique blend of beliefs and customs that developed over centuries out of remarkable historical circumstances.

According to the Migration Policy Institute (Lal), “The political culture of racial patronage the coups spawned effectively marginalized the community.” The Migration Policy Institute sums it up best: “People left because they saw few prospects of advancement from themselves and especially for their children” (Lal). The political instability and insecurity in the Fijian society forced many Indo-Fijians to migrate to the nearby bigger nations like Australia & New Zealand in search of a better tomorrow for their children.

‘C.F. Andrews’ made the first of three visits to Fiji in 1916 and wrote scathing reports of moral collapse and social ills on the plantations. He particularly wrote about the Indian women who could not go to the rivers and temple to worship and that there was no household shrines, they lead a joyless life. The Kanpur newspaper “The Pratap” expressed the widespread feelings:

*“Behold, full of sorrow, Surcharged with grief, From beyond the ocean borne  
On the wings of wind, comes the wail of their weeping.”*

The above lines sum it up and explain it all, the hardships the Indian women underwent in the initial days that they couldn’t even practice their day to day religious and traditional customs freely.

In his book “Indians in Fiji”(1963), Adrian C. Mayer puts more light on the ship voyage to Fiji wherein he states that the caste differences were disregarded as all the people were sharing a common cabin, even ate together and worked on plantations no matter what their families use to do back in India as per their caste.

R.R. Nayacakalou’s work in his book “Leadership in Fiji” (1975) was an important attempt to analyze and understand the process of modern leadership among Fijians particularly in relation to traditional forms of authority in a situation of rapid social change. He observed that ‘Fijians generally accept that only some parts of their traditional life should be changed.

Unlike other books that have been written on Fiji, Rajendra Prasad’s “Tear in Paradise” is more of a self-account and historical journey. The book was published in Auckland in September 2004, soon after the 125th anniversary celebrations of the arrival of the first indentured labourers in Fiji. The Author sets the context of his carefully pieced-together version of the history of indentured labour with an

emotional account of his 'pilgrimage' to trace his ancestral roots in India, where a combination of serendipity and persistence takes him to his paternal grandfather's hamlet.

In colonial times, race relations were a reflection of British colonial policy, viewing and treating indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians differently and minimising contact between the two groups. Traditional Fijian society became romanticised and indigenous Fijians were regarded as a “white man’s burden” whereas Indo-Fijians were looked upon as mere labour commodities (Jayawardena “Culture and Ethnicity”)

In her book, *Fiji: A Precarious Coalition* (2001), Shubha Singh mainly focuses of the time period after the first coup in 1987. She highlighted that since the first coup the Fiji has caught the attention of the wrong reasons. The Indo-Fijians and Fijians had lived together side-by-side for over a hundred years and it was only the violent coups that had disturbed the peace. And, that Indo-Fijians had faced enormous hardships during the Indentured times but preserved. She hopes that the democracy returns to Fiji and when it returns, it returns for a longer period of time for the betterment of Fiji.

An Interview with Subramani, *The contemporary pacific*, published on March 22, 2001, by Author: Hereniko, Vilsoni. Subramani, professor of literature at the University of South Pacific in Fiji. In his interview he was mainly asked about the 1987 coup and tolerance level in the Fiji. This interview is a clear indication of the difficulties the Indo-Fijians and Fijians had between them but which according to Subramani were tolerable and within a democratic frame. It gives a clear indication of what the first coup of 1987 had brought with it, a way of thinking that a handful native Fijians believed in including both people outside the government and inside.

Landy et al. (2004) highlighted that the caste and religion took a backseat when these people moved from their native land as they formed bonds during their journey (known as jahaji-bhais, literally translated from Hindi means Ship-mates/brothers) which resulted in a new form of kinship. But, however the memory of this journey faded away over a period of time for the new generations that came.

Kavita Nandan's *Stolen Worlds* (2005) is examined as a means of extending the scope of Indo-Fijian identities and representation in text. *Stolen Worlds* is used as texts that come up with multiple narratives of identity and representation, to expand on existing literary and non-literary studies of the Indo-Fijian diaspora through its literature. Brij V Lal, the editor and contributor of a prologue and five chapters to *Bittersweet*, has been most responsible for the considerable depth of research and publication on the Indo-Fijian experience. *Bittersweet* adds an important body of literature to our understanding of the individual and collective memories of Fiji's Indo-Fijian population. Although many of *Bittersweet*'s authors live outside Fiji, reminiscences of mostly rural life in Fiji in the mid and late twentieth century form the central link among all the essays.

Carmen Voigt (2008), talks about the changes that the culture, belief and practices of the Indo-Fijians underwent after their secondary migrations to bigger nations like Australia and New-Zealand due to their desire for fulfillment in a foreign nation and due to their desire for greater security. The Indo-Fijian case demonstrates how descendants of migrants have moved away from their ancestral homeland as a result of the loss of personal links and cultural changes. Since most Indo-Fijians have little idea of either their caste background or their exact origin in India, they have lost the parameters to locate themselves in relation to other Indians. Being unable to link back into Indian society, Indo-Fijians increasingly stress their emotional and day-to-day links into the Pacific.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design:**

Historical-Analytical, in which there were historical sources that were be analysed and which would in turn helped in the event of forecasting. And, because historical analysis were engaged in as background research of my study, it included examining historical facts. There are already available facts or information being used and analysed to make a critical evaluation of the material.

I have referred to written materials such as scholars' thesis, journals, books which interprets or reviews previous findings and papers presented in various conferences.

## **Findings**

The Republic of the Fiji Islands is a multicultural island nation with cultural traditions of Oceanic, European, South Asian, and East Asian origins. Immigrants have accepted several aspects of the indigenous culture, but a national culture has not evolved. Commercial, settler, missionary, and British colonial interests imposed Western ideologies and infrastructures on the native peoples and Asian immigrants that facilitated the operation of a British crown colony.

The indigenous name of the islands is Viti, an Austronesian word meaning "east" or "sunrise." Ethnic Fijians call themselves Kai Viti ("the people of Viti") or i Taukei ("the owners of the land"). Until the advent of colonial rule in 1873, the population of Viti Levu, the principal island of the Fiji group, was divided into hierarchically organized coastal peoples and more egalitarian highland peoples in the interior.

People from different parts of India, now called Indo-Fijians, came to work as indentured laborers on sugar plantations. After their term of service, many remained in Fiji. Some became merchants and business-people; others remained on the land as free peasant cultivators. The early immigrants were joined later by freely-migrating people from India's merchant castes, mostly from Gujarat. European immigrants came primarily from Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain.

Fijian, Hindi, and English became the official languages after independence in 1970, and linguistic autonomy was guaranteed by the constitution of 1997. English is the language of interethnic communication, administration, government, trade and commerce, and education. Fijian and Hindi often are spoken at home and are used in

religious contexts and on radio and television. Fijian Hindi is related to several Hindi-related North Indian languages

**National Identity.** Common citizenship, multi-ethnic institutions (some schools, colleges, the police force, civil service, civil aviation authority, etc.), an English-language mass media that caters to a multi-ethnic clientele, national sporting teams that attract intense following, and pride in the beauty and bounty of their oceanic homeland, are some of the factors that help to create a "Fiji Islands" national identity that surmounts the otherwise all-important ethnic affiliations.

**Ethnic Relations.** The principal ethnic groups— Fijians, Indo-Fijians, and people of mixed Euro-Fijian descent—intermingle with ease at the work place, in shops and markets, and in some educational and recreational settings, but interact much less freely at home. Religion and domestic custom tend to cause greater division than does language. But political aspiration is perhaps the greatest divisive factor, with indigenous Fijians demanding political paramountcy and Indo-Fijians, political equality. Naturalized European and part-European communities tend to mingle more closely with ethnic Fijians than with Indo-Fijians.

**Marriage.** Among ethnic Fijians, marriages were traditionally arranged, with the groom's father often selecting a bride from a subclan with which his family had a long-term relationship; ties between lineages and families were strengthened in this manner. Today, although individuals choose their spouses freely, marriage is still considered an alliance between groups rather than individuals. When parental approval is refused, a couple may elope. To avoid the shame of an irregular relationship, the husband's parents must quickly offer their apologies and bring gifts to the wife's family, who are obliged to accept them. Marriage is no longer polygynous, but divorce and remarriage are common. Inter-marriage is rare with Indo-Fijians, but Fijians often marry Europeans, Pacific islanders, and Chinese. Indo-Fijian marriages traditionally were also parentally arranged.



**Infant Care.** The Fijian and Indo-Fijian communities pamper infants, providing them with every comfort and convenience and enveloping them in an atmosphere of loving attention. Older people are particularly affectionate toward the very young. As an infant grows, it is disciplined and socialized by both parents but especially the mother, siblings, and other members of the domestic unit.

**Child Rearing and Education.** Among ethnic Fijians, a child's level of maturity is measured by its capacity to experience shame and fear. Children learn to fear being alone in the dark and to feel safe at home and in the village as opposed to the forest. Mothers warn children that at night the souls of the recent dead can snatch them away, and children are threatened with supernatural misfortune in the form of ogres and devils. Children are given a great deal of freedom but are expected to recognize shame related to bodily functions and to being in the presence of social superiors. Children are socialized between three and six years of age by being taught about their role in the sub clan and their familial inheritance.

Indo-Fijians traditionally have permitted their children much less freedom but have now begun to adopt Western ideas about raising children. In traditional homes, the relationship between father and son is formal and reserved, but fathers are more affectionate toward their daughters, who will leave the family after marriage. Mothers are extremely indulgent toward their sons and strict with their daughters, whom they prepare for the role of a daughter-in-law.



**Religion.** Indo-Fijian Hindus follow a variety of religious customs brought by their forebears from India and are divided between the reformed and the orthodox. The religious practices of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs inherited from India are characterized by fasts, feasts, and festivals as well as prescribed rituals that cover major life events.

In the Indo-Fijian community, religious scholars, holy men, and temple priests are the most important religious practitioners. Indo-Fijian Hinduism relies on stories, songs, and rituals to teach its precepts. Ritualized readings of the Ramayana and worship before divine images at home or in a temple are important aspects of religious life. Annual ceremonies are sponsored by many temples.

Among Indo-Fijians, Hindus may cremate their dead, though this is not the norm, as it is in India; Muslims insist on burial. These two religions offer very different visions of life after death: Hindus assume that the deceased's soul will be reborn and Muslims are confident that the true believer will be rewarded with eternal life in paradise.

**Secular Celebrations.** National holidays include major Christian, Hindu, and Muslim holy days: Christmas, Easter, the Hindus' Diwali, and the Prophet Mohammed's birthday. Purely secular festivals include Ratu Sakuna Day, which honors the man whom many regard as the founder of modern Fiji; Constitution Day; and Fiji Day. None of these holidays provokes intense patriotic fervor.

**Food in Daily Life.** Fijians have adopted chili peppers, unleavened bread, rice, vegetables, curries, and tea from the Indian population, while Indians have adapted to

eating taro and cassava and drinking kava, a narcotic drink. However, the diets of the two groups remain noticeably different.



A traditional Fijian meal includes a starch, relishes, and a beverage. The starch component, which is referred to as "real food," is usually taro, yams, sweet potatoes, or manioc but may consist of tree crops such as breadfruit, bananas, and nuts. Because of its ease of cultivation, manioc has become the most widely consumed root crop. Relishes include meat, fish and seafood, and leafy vegetables. Canned meat and fish are also very popular. Vegetables often are boiled in coconut milk, another dietary staple. Soup is made of fish or vegetables. Water is the most common beverage, but coconut water and fruit juices also are drunk. Tea and an infusion of lemon leaves are served hot.

People generally eat three meals a day, but there is much variability in meal times and snacking is common. Most food is boiled, but some is broiled, roasted, or fried. Cooked food is served on a tablecloth spread on the floor mat inside the house. The evening meal, which is usually the most formal, requires the presence of all the family members and may not begin without the male head of the household. Men are served first and receive the best foods and the largest portions. Meals are meant to be shared as an expression of social harmony. Traditional food taboos relating to totemic animals and plants generally are ignored.

Indo-Fijian meals also include starch and relishes. The staple tends to be either flatbread made from imported flour or else locally grown rice. Relishes are primarily vegetarian, but some meat and fish is consumed when it is available. Many Indo-Fijians obey religious prohibitions against beef (Hindus) or pork (Muslims). Restaurants, tea shops, kava bars, and food stalls are ubiquitous in the towns. In the larger towns, Euro-Fijian, French, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and

American fast-food restaurants serve a multi-ethnic clientele of local people, resident expatriates, and tourists.

**Mandali Groups.** There are several mandali or groups formed in Fiji who carry religious activities which are mainly Hindu based. Whilst many of the small Mandalis are formed by local communities of a certain area, there are several organizations like Sanatana Dharma, Arya Samaj who have also formed Mandalis and activities are carried on regular basis. These mandalis have been a major source of religious chanting, cultural revival and an interactive way of engaging new generation in retaining the cultural heritage and traditions.

### **More facts about Indo-Fijians**

Records reveal that efforts were also made to reconstitute the lost elements of ancestral culture and fashion with the importance of religion in order to maintain Indian cultural identities overseas. That's why most of the settled Indians in Fiji had the texts of Hinduism viz Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas. Two main Hindu organizations- Sanatana Dharma and Arya Samaj had significant role in this connection. Other religious instructional texts, folk songs and tale-books were part of it. Such theoretical constructs on identify and representation of Indo-Fijian diaspora provided a pack of socio-cultural contents, which could not disappear with the passage of time and circumstances.

The fact that there was no extreme oppression of any ethnic group in Fiji is a positive sign to place reliance on more socio-cultural articulation first then to resolve the other issues.

Indo-Fijians are liberal in terms of caste and religion and possess high power of religious tolerance. The main religions are Hinduism and Muslim. Their roots in India are Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in North Eastern India, Southern Indian and Bengal (now Bangladesh) – Punjabis, Gujratis later on arrived in Fiji and formed part of Fiji's business sector.

In brief, Indo-Fijians are ethnic Indian but upbringing and way of life as Fijian. A brief of the socio-cultural aspect of Indo-Fijians reveal as under -

### Indo-Fijians

Sl. No.	Description of socio-cultural mark	Type
1.	Ethnicity	Indian
2.	Upbringing and life style	Fijian
3.	Food and rituals	Indian
4.	Faith	Indian
5.	Rigidity of India caste culture and social structure	Melanesian way of life (Fijian)
6.	Dialect	Fiji-Hindi

In spite of the differences, in some areas of Fiji, both cultures are mixed to a great extent as an exception to the rest part of the country e.g. in cane belts of Viti Levu also called as Western side. Both communities are in practice of life style of each other and had a combined voice on political level also.

### **CONCLUSION**

Ethnic and cultural differences in Fiji are linked with the state functions. The ethnic identity is more related to social organization as compared to culture. It draws a boundary to define a group. It is flexible and faces competition within environment. At the same time, division between Fijians and Indo-Fijians is wide and has a political history. The support of Indo-Fijian in 2006 coup is new event towards the line of multicultural and democratic set up. While in the past the attempts made for the two cultures to come together viz Bavadra coalition government in 1999 were not lived long. In view of this, Fijian identity may be expanded to cover the Indo-Fijian and others only be weakening the strict boundaries established by Fijians in a socio-cultural way through a long drawn strategy, social boundaries may be reconstructed and reset a common political and economic interest for both groups. Since the Indian culture in Fiji has undergone a number of transformations and is still facing the

impact of globalization and modernization. It means ethnic rigidity of Indo-Fijians may also be made flexible as much as possible to get a political and economic security in Fiji from Fijian Community apart from the state.

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