

An encounter in Fiji

Over a month has lapsed since there was a government in Fiji. One George Speight, said to be a failed businessman accompanied by some soldiers of the Fijian army and some gangsters, has taken over the parliament building in which he is holding the elected prime minister and 26 other members of his government as hostages. The former president has left his office and flew off to a neighbouring small island.

The army has declared martial law but seems not to take a firm action against Speight and his gang. Instead, the army has granted them amnesty and is negotiating with them. Mr Speight comes to an agreement one day and resiles from it the next day. This has been going on for far too long. The latest is that the army has had a shoot out with Mr Speight's squad and five persons have been injured.

The last time I was in Fiji, it was 33 years ago. My wife and I had flown from Auckland, New Zealand to Nandi, the airport on the Southeast of the main island, Vitu Levu.

Perhaps it would be useful to give a thumb nail sketch of the Republic of Fiji. It stands in the South West of the Pacific Ocean, half way between New Zealand and Hawaii. It consists of 844 islands of which the two main islands, Vitu Levu and Vanua Levu, are of volcanic origin surrounded by coral reef. The smaller islands are entirely of coral. The population is mixed. In 1874 when the British took over the islands as a colony, they found the local people so appreciative of the benign climate that the people refused to exert themselves by engaging in any form of labour.

The British were interested in produce that could only be grown in tropical climates such as sugar and rubber, and began to plant these in their tropical colonies. They chose Malaya for planting rubber and Fiji, besides Trinidad and Guyana for growing sugar. In each of these countries, the local population, gentlemen, were totally averse to any hard work. The population in Fiji was of

Malaya-Polynesian ethnicity. The British had an eager reservoir of labour—India. They took labourers from India to Malaya, Fiji, Trinidad and Guyana, besides a few other places like countries in Africa.

The population of Fiji today consists of the descendants of the Indians taken to Fiji in the late 19th century who by dint of hard work besides proliferating profusely, prospered inordinately with the result that they own all the businesses and other means of production. This created an understandable envy and jealousy among the original Melanesian-Polynesian Fijians who are barely in a majority. The population of Indian origin is 44 per cent of the total.

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In 1970, Fiji gained independence from Britain and became a republic. The constitution that was put in place gave equal rights to the ethnic Indians but that did not seem to satisfy the original Fijians. A coup by a colonel was carried out in 1987 and after some time that problem was overcome and a new constitution was promulgated whereby because of one man one vote, the ethnic Indians were able to gain a majority in parliament and form a government under Mr Mahinder Choudhry, who, as one writes this, is still held as a hostage by Mr Speight in the parliament building.

Fiji had become a favourite tourist resort. It was in search of sun and sand that my wife and I flew to Fiji. We had booked a cottage about 32 miles from Nandi. It was a holiday catering entirely to a floating population such as ourselves. Since it was self-catering, we had gone into a grocer's shop in Nandi to

stock up for the duration of our stay. Inevitably the shop was owned by an Indian.

An interesting thing happened during our stay at that idyllic camp. When we woke the next morning, although there was no habitation nearby, there were about twenty persons, all of Indian origin, who had come to see me. The grape vine, no doubt from the grocer's shop, had told them of a visitor from South Asia and they had travelled all the way from Nandi to see me. The object of their curiosity was that they wanted to know about their origins. They had been transported from India as illiterate labourers and had no knowledge or record of where they came from in

India. Their curiosity to find an answer to where they originated from was what had driven them to me.

I am a bit of a Professor Higgins and in the Punjab I can tell from which district a person comes from. Although the language of the original Fijians is of Malayo-Polynesian origin, these people spoke Hindi—more like Poorbi. I listened to them and judging from the use of by now an ossified language and their physiognomy, I came to the conclusion that they originated from Bihar. By now, they also spoke English, which is the official language of Fiji. When I solved their puzzle, they were mighty pleased and joyfully bid me farewell.

A few days later, we returned to Nandi from whereabouts midnight we took off for Hawaii, crossing the International Date Line heading towards the rising sun, suddenly becoming older by a day.