

**Indo-Fijian Counter Hegemony in Fiji:  
A historical structural approach**

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**Abstract**

Indo-Fijians make up about 37 per cent of Fiji's current population and have a unique language and culture, which evolved since Indians first arrived into Fiji as indentured labourers on board the ship *Leonidas* in 1879. Since their arrival in the British colony as sugar plantation labourers, Indo-Fijian activists led counter hegemonic movements against the colonial government during and after indenture in 1920-21, 1943 and 1960. Indo-Fijian activists demanded political equality with Europeans and constantly agitated for better wages and living conditions through disruptive strikes and boycotts. After independence, the focus of Indo-Fijians shifted to political equality with indigenous Fijians and access to land leases from indigenous landowners on reasonable terms; and these were ongoing themes in the 1972, 1977 and 1982 elections. However, Indo-Fijian counter hegemony took a new form in 1987 with the formation of the multiracial Fiji Labour Party and National Federation Party coalition government but indigenous Fijian nationalists and the military deposed the government and established discriminatory policies against Indo-Fijians which were dismantled by the Fiji Labour Party-led coalition government in 1999. However, indigenous nationalists regrouped and deposed the government in 2000, prompting another round of protests and resistance from Indo-Fijians. Using Gramscian conceptualisation of counter hegemony as disruptive protest, resistance and dissent, I argue that political mobilisation of indentured labourers and their descendants was aimed at restoring political rights, honour, self-respect and dignity lost during colonial and post-colonial periods in Fiji. In this article, I argue that Indo-Fijian counter hegemony was in the form of mobilisation, based on assembling alternative ideas to create a culture of disruptive protests and rebellion against hegemonic social forces. Indo-Fijian dissent aimed at elevating the voices of the exploited, marginalised, discriminated against and disenfranchised in a society preoccupied with ethnicity and race. In this regard, the history of Indo-Fijian counter hegemony in Fiji is narrated within the historical structure of protests, boycotts and strikes and constant political agitation.

**Keywords:** counter hegemony, Indo-Fijians, strikes, protests, political mobilisation**Counter hegemony: The theoretical foundations**

Counter hegemony is a response to hegemony (domination by a political class) and aims at replacing the existing social and political order with an alternative social and political

narrative, informed by discourses on exploitation, marginalisation and discrimination. However, counter hegemony, in the form of challenges to the established political class, can be fully realised only within the context of the philosophy of praxis, which is basically the theory of contradictions (Fonseca 2016), emerging from history and from the problems inherent in given historical and hegemonic structures. The theory of contradictions is based on competing social interpretations where historical structures are re-assessed and re-contextualised by marginalised groups. For Gramsci, the counter hegemonic movement will be led by organic intellectuals, similar to the Marxian vanguard, who will spread social consciousness among the people and lead protests, boycotts and disruptions against the state, the elite and the established political class. This counter-hegemonic strategy is known as the war of position: a socio-political strategy to form a cohesive bloc of social alliances to bring about constructive political change where the voices of the marginalised are substituted as the dominant political narrative. In counter hegemony, ideology, culture and institutions play significant roles in constructing and structuring an alternative vision to the existing political order. In the Gramscian sense, ideology is identified as distinct from but related to the economic substructure and is an ideology that is used to organise the masses against capitalism and the market economy that promotes inequality and social disintegration. The ideological basis of counter hegemony forms an important nexus in the mobilisation of social forces for change and political transformation against failures of global and state political economies. Gramsci, however, also realised that not all change can be triggered through culture, propaganda and ideology alone. He emphasised that there were historic political analytics that had to be considered so that the role of power, politics and social forces are adequately appreciated in the making of history.

Gramscian scholars analysed counter hegemony as realms of politics, power, ideology, culture and institutions, where non-elite analytical discourses are progressed and affirmed as mainstream historical discourse. Leonardo Salamini (1974) argued that Gramsci became the theoretician of counter hegemony without minimising the importance of the underlying socio-economic forces, for it was marginalised voices that provided the impetus for social action and social change. For Gramsci, 'the relations of production do not evolve according to autonomous and self-generating laws, but are regulated or modified by the human consciousness' (Salamini 1974: 367). It was this consciousness that enabled humans to identify social and historical issues and challenge hegemony through counter hegemonic activities such as agitation for egalitarian community and constructive social outcomes for the majority. According to Paul Piccone, Gramsci saw Marxism as an absolute history, 'so far as it synthesises the tradition and concretely works out the means whereby the emancipation of humans is carried out by destroying the last and most advanced forms of internal social divisions' (Piccone 1976: 493) based on division of labour under the capitalist mode of production. Piccone goes on to reinterpret Gramsci within the meaning of praxis, which is derived by analysing historical contradictions inherent in capitalist modes of production, accumulation and domination. Praxis is the 'creative activity which re-constitutes the past in order to forge the political tools in the present, to bring about a qualitatively different future' in the form of counter hegemony (Piccone 1976: 493). There is an important conceptual link between Salamini and Piccone in the sense that the reinterpretation of the past provides the

consciousness required for changing the future and this change can be evolutionary, revolutionary or strategic, with various combinations of these as historical specific moments, depending on political and social contexts.

In 1977, Raymond Williams referred to hegemony as a culture of domination and subordination of particular classes (Williams 1977: 110). Williams conceptualised counter hegemony within the dialectics of domination and subordination sustained by identities and relationships of a specific economic, political and cultural system. Williams re-cast Gramscian theory to highlight class warfare in 1970s Great Britain, but more importantly he emphasised the role of counterculture and social forces in enabling change for a more egalitarian society. The essential element of Gramscian counter hegemony was the ideology that subordinate groups can utilise political strategy to undermine hegemony of the elite and the ruling political class and, according to James Hawley, 'Gramsci's Marxism posits the development of a determinate situation, a creation of historical forces which do not pre-determine and make inevitable the direction or nature of social action. Rather Gramscian Marxism attempts to create the consciousness of past conditions which live in the present in human minds and institutions as ideology' (Hawley 1980: 585). According to Williams and Howley the essence of Gramscian theory is located in cultural and social forces, which informed anti-establishment social and political discourses in anticipation of a more equal and less stratified society.

In the early 1980s Robert Cox utilised Gramscian historicism to construct a historical analytical framework that provided a new analytical framework called critical theory that was used for the analysis of historical and social forces, including counter hegemony. According to Cox, critical theory is a 'theory of history in the sense of being concerned not just with the past but with a continuous process of historical change' (Cox 1981: 129). Critical theory is also concerned with real world problems 'and its aims are just as practical as those of problem-solving theory' (Cox 1981: 130). For Cox, the objective of the historicist approach is to identify alternative social orders and trigger 'strategic action' (Cox 1981: 130) for change. Through careful reading of the past and Gramsci, Cox problematised history and, like his predecessors Williams, Salamini and Piccone, reinforced the role of consciousness in assisting analysts to gain understanding of the 'broader time perspective of historical structures' (Cox 1981: 135).

The Coxian method of historical structures is analysed in detail by Timothy J. Sinclair (2016: 512), who argues that 'an historical structure does not determine action but constitutes the context within which action takes place'. It is therefore important to understand historical and social forces when discussing hegemony and counter hegemony. For Cox, counter hegemony is a response to hegemonic historical structures. Social mobilisation against the ruling elite is aimed at creating a counterculture by developing a counter history where the voices of the marginalised and the exploited become the driver of political change. Randolph Persaud (2015), who emphasised the role of race and ethnicity in counter hegemony, further articulates the analytical frame for counter hegemony for post-colonial discourse. Persaud argued that there was 'hesitancy in understanding the generative capacity of race in the configuration and reproduction of domestic social formations' because it did not fit neatly into the state-centric international relations theory. Persaud highlighted that the international political order was an aggregation of domestic social formations and as a result an effort has

to be made to understand the way local ethnic and cultural configurations 'influence core values and ideas' (Persaud 2001: 112-128). The central thesis of Persaud was to locate dominant ideas in the social relations of power. These social relations are produced at the local level by the elites, who also play a significant role in the international historic-bloc as key stakeholders. One of the tenets of social and cultural relations is that boundaries of ethnicity and race are reproduced at both local and international levels and synchronised vertically and horizontally so that the ruling elite continue their political hegemony under the capitalist economic system. Elite reproduction of race and ethnicity are articulatory principles on exclusion of marginalised and the oppressed in the society and these principles embedded in sustaining political hegemony include a complex process of structuration that is underpinned by the configuration of social forces.

Counter hegemony in the Gramscian sense is a mobilisation against political hegemony with the aim to replace the existing socio-political order. This mobilisation is led by an ethnic or cultural group (Persaud 2001, 2015, 2016) and is based on inventing and assembling alternative ideas to create a counter culture and history where the voices of the marginalised in the society are given meaning and structure at all levels of social discourse. The process of meaning making or semiotics (Jessop 2004, Jessop and Sum 2016) is an important component of counter hegemony, since meanings are derived from social and cultural contexts and these derived meanings are utilised to provide ideological and sociological justifications for mobilisation against hegemonic entities. In Fiji, the Indians who came to the colony under the indentured labour system fought the system through counter hegemonic movements that highlighted the exploitation of Indian indentured women by European overseers in the sugar estates. After indenture, the counter hegemony took the form of direct action, with strikes in 1920 and 1921 followed by intensive campaigns against the colonial government in 1943 and 1960. Indo-Fijian counter hegemony led the colonial authorities in Fiji to forge closer ties with indigenous Fijian chiefs and Europeans in the hope that the alliance would curb Indo-Fijian ambitions to wrestle political power from the Europeans. Following independence from Great Britain in 1970, the Indo-Fijian-dominated National Federation Party challenged the indigenous Fijian chief Ratu Mara and the party formed an alliance with the Fiji Labour Party to form a powerful counter hegemonic political force that dislodged the chief-backed Alliance Party from power in 1987. However, the military intervened and Indo-Fijians were forced back to their counter hegemonic strategies throughout the late 1980s and the 1990s, resulting in the victory of the Fiji Labour Party-led counter hegemony in the 1999 elections. In response, indigenous nationalists refused to accept the verdict of the people under the 1997 Constitution and there was another coup in May 2000. Following the coup, the Indo-Fijian counter hegemony continued in the form of protests and boycotts until the Republic of Fiji Military Forces Commander Voreqe Bainimarama executed a coup in 2006 and restored Indo-Fijian political rights via the 2013 Constitution.

## **The Indenture experience: Counter hegemony during girmit**

Fiji's first Governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, devised a paternalistic system of indigenous administration, which spared the indigenous Fijians from the destructive forces of colonial capitalism. Gordon was determined indigenous Fijians were not to suffer the same fate as their counterparts in New Zealand, Australia and the Americas; and to ensure that the indigenous way of life was preserved, Gordon instituted the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) as the 'official' custodian of indigenous custom and tradition (France 1968: 6-32; Heath 1974: 81-92). The Council campaigned on behalf of indigenous Fijians and requested the colonial government to cease using a small number of indigenous labourers on commercial farms. According to the indigenous Fijian chiefs, the rigours of plantation life compromised the 'Fijian way of life', which was based on communal modes of production. Gordon enthusiastically endorsed the views of the chiefs, but was also mindful that the survival of the Colony of Fiji depended on establishing a viable economy. Fiji's land and climate were well suited for the establishment of sugar estates and in 1872 the sugar industry was established in Fiji. At first the European planters relied on Melanesian labourers from New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) and Solomon Islands and indentured workers from Japan but with growing protest against the use of slave labour in the Pacific, the British government intervened and ended the trade. British intervention, however, created a serious labour shortage as European commercial interests in Fiji pressured the colonial administration for labourers from South Asia (Scarr 1976: 5-24).

It was not until 1879 that the Fiji government, under the direction of Gordon, started to import Indians to Fiji under the indentured labour scheme, which had existed in the British colonies since 1837. The Indians were to come to Fiji and work for five years as bonded labourers and another five as free workers, after which they became entitled to a paid trip back to India. Those who did not wish to return were allowed to stay in the colony as British subjects (Parnaby 1956: 55-65). Fiji's colonial authorities quickly established recruiting offices in Calcutta and from 1905 in South India and hired recruiters, who were paid to entice sometimes gullible and illiterate peasants from India's United Provinces to come to Fiji. According to Mayer, 'recruiters played on the ignorance of the peasants saying for instance that Fiji was a place near Calcutta; or exaggerated the value of the wages to be earned whilst saying nothing about the penal nature of the indenture contract (Mayer 1961: 2). Some peasants also saw the indentured labour system as an opportunity to flee famine and caste oppression prevalent in late nineteenth century India. Mariam Pirbhai (2009: 7) notes that the "high percentage of lower caste Hindus has led historians to speculate that emigration may have presented itself as an opportunity to escape the rigid hierarchies and occupational structure of the caste system."

Indian labourers came mostly from North India, because it was a chief recruiting ground for other Sugar colonies: Mauritius, British Guyana, Trinidad, Natal, Surinam, etc (Lal 1979: 18). North India also had a high concentration of agricultural castes, which had experience in rigorous labour under India's harsh climate. The Indians came from different regions, spoke

different dialects, and practiced different customs and religions. Most indentured labourers came from the United Provinces in colonial India. A large number of recruits came from Shahabad in Bihar, Parganas in Bengal, and Allahabad, Basti, Benares, Cawnpore, Fyzabad, Gonda, Gorakhpur and Lucknow in the eastern part of the United Provinces. Other districts that contributed more than five per cent in at least one year were Agra, Aligarh, Ghazipur, Jaunpur and Muttra in the United Provinces; Darbhanga, Gaya, Manbhum, Patna, and Saran in Bihar; Ambala and Rohtak in Punjab; and Bilaspur and Jaipur in the Central Provinces (Gillion 1956: 147). While the colonial regime in Fiji recruited physically fit men, they deliberately neglected the number of women in each intake, thereby creating competition for sexual partners on the sugar plantations in Fiji, resulting in high rates of suicide and murder. Brij Lal (1983: 102) notes that in the case of Fiji, altogether total of 13,696 females and 31,458 males were transported during the period of indentured emigration. Indian women who came to Fiji were believed to be fleeing social scorn or caste oppression in India. However in Fiji, women were sexually exploited by both male labourers and colonial overseers (Naidu 1980).

The narrative behind the sexual exploitation of indentured women by European men in Fiji formed the basis for counter hegemony against the indentured labour system. Almost nightly stories of harassment and abuse of women circulated throughout the 'coolie' lines. In the minds of the indentured labourers these narratives provided justification for protests against the indenture system. The labourers were taking on the cause of protecting the reputation and the honour or 'izzat' of indentured women. According to Brij Lal, there was high suicide rate and violence against Indian indentured women. Between 1885 and 1920, 96 indentured immigrants in Fiji were murdered, of whom 68 were women and 28 men (Lal 1985a: 137). The plight of the indentured women provided anti-indenture activists with 'moral' and 'ethical' grounds to condemn the labour traffic. Two most publicised stories of European sexual oppression in Fiji were related to attacks on the Indian women Kunti (Lal, 1985b: 55) and Naraini (Lal, 1983: 97-98; Harvey, 2012: 337-348).

According to Brij Lal, the story of Kunti was widely circulated both in India and Fiji and gave impetus to the anti-indenture movement. More important perhaps was the imaginary of European men exploiting Indian indentured women in Fiji and hence attacking the very foundation of Indian culture, requiring death before dishonour. The narrative of Kunti is provided hereunder for emphasis:

On 10 April 1913, Kunti, a female Indian indentured labourer, was sent alone to weed an isolated banana patch at Nadewa in Rewa, Fiji.' Enforced isolation was a common and very effective technique to deal with recalcitrant workers. Kunti was being punished for her allegedly quarrelsome behavior and for giving the plantation management 'a great deal of trouble'. Later that afternoon, Overseer Cobcroft came on his usual round of inspection, caught hold of Kunti and made 'improper suggestions to her'. Kunti screamed, struggled herself free from Cobcroft, ran towards the Wainibokasi river a little distance away, and threw herself into the water. Fortunately so Kunti told the world-she was saved from drowning by Jagdeo, a boy who happened to be in a dinghy nearby (Lal, 1985: 55).

While Kunti was fleeing the inappropriate sexual advances of a European overseer, Naraini on the other hand was subjected to direct physical violence. The story of Naraini also highlights that exploitation of Indian indentured women in Fiji was not limited to only Europeans and that Indian indentured men were also violent towards women but the violence by European men on the plantation was seen as unacceptable abuse by the cultural white outgroup. According to Jane Harvey (2012: 338):

Early Monday morning, just two days after the death of her child and only six days after having given birth, Naraini set about her task of breaking stones with a hammer. After working for a few hours in the hot sun she stopped and sat down, too weak to continue. The sirdar approached Naraini and told her to return to work before the overseer saw her and so she made a futile attempt to continue working. When Bloomfield visited Naraini, he demanded to know why she was not working. The sirdar claimed that he told the overseer that the woman was very sick 'and bleeding from her private parts, and couldn't stand up to work'. Hearing this, Bloomfield walked over to Naraini, kicked her and asked her why she was unable to work. She said to him 'I can't do this work, it is too heavy for me, give me some other work.' It seems that Bloomfield had difficulty understanding what she was saying, partly because she was crying but also because he did not understand Hindustani. He asked another worker what Naraini had said and then proceeded to assault her, picking her up by the hair and dropping her on a heap of stones several times, kicking her and beating her with a stick. According to the sirdar, Mr Allman, the junior overseer, while not participating in the assault, simply stood by and did not do or say anything.

The abuse of Kunti and Naraini played an important role in mobilising anti-indenture counter hegemonic forces. The anti-indenture activists in India – Totaram Sanadhya, Indian journalist Benarsidas Chaturvedi, C.F. Andrews, and Mohandas Gandhi – pressured the British government for an immediate end to indenture and the cessation of exploitation of indentured men and women on European plantations (Lal & Yadav 1992). To avoid further criticism, the British colonial administrators abrogated the indentured labour scheme in 1916 (Andrews & Pearson 1918). The end of indenture was a relief to the anti-indenture activists. But what was going to happen to the Indians in Fiji? A few Indians from Fiji returned to India, but most stayed in the colony and established permanent homes. Once the Indians were released from the authoritarian labour system, they moved their attention to political and social issues including demands for better living conditions, wages, and political representation. For the Indians in Fiji the struggle was now for recognition of their hard labour during indenture and the reclaiming of self-respect, deeply injured by the indenture experience.

In 1916, the Indians in Fiji were partly successful in their struggle for political representation. Responding to pressure from the Indo-Fijians and India, the colonial government in Fiji appointed Badri Maharaj to the Legislative Council. However, by 1920, India had exhausted all avenues for acquiring labour and the indentured system became a thing of the past. Free from the shackles of indenture, Indo-Fijians became a growing social and economic force in Fiji and utilised organisational skills acquired during indenture to lead counter hegemonic movements against the colonial government.

## Indo-Fijian activism: Post-indenture counter hegemony

Among the political activists who came from India to Fiji was lawyer Manilal Maganlal in 1912. As a champion of Indian rights abroad, Manilal established in Fiji the Indian Imperial Association, which assisted in providing social programs for the general improvement of the Indian community in Fiji. The activities of Manilal created uneasiness among affluent Europeans, who saw him as a supporter of Indian nationalism, attempting to stir up revolt among Indians in Fiji. In a letter to *The Fiji Times and Herald*, the Europeans complained that the Indian Imperial Association was a 'quasi-secret society' consisting of Manilal, George Suchit, Ram Singh, and about a dozen of their personal friends (Gillion 1977: 22). What bothered the Europeans most was the challenge to the colonial municipal ordinance, which was amended by the European settlers to make voter registration conditional upon the ratepayers proving literacy in the English language. Manilal analysed that the pre-conditions imposed by the colonial authorities were discriminatory and were aimed at denying Indo-Fijians their right to vote. Manilal struck at the heart of the colonial organisation and highlighted to his compatriots how laws were utilised by the colonial government to circumvent Indo-Fijian rights. By 15 January 1920, Indo-Fijian discontent with the colonial government spilled into a strike at the Public Works Department in Suva. The strike escalated as Indo-Fijians demanded political rights and highlighted increasing poverty in their community as a result of rises in the cost of living during and after World War I. The colonial authorities refused to listen to the grievances of Indo-Fijians as strikers turned to sabotage: telephone wires between Suva and Nausori were disconnected, bridges were sabotaged, and on 12 February 1920, police with fixed bayonets dispersed a stone-throwing crowd at Nausori near Suva.

In the 1920 strike, indigenous Fijians were enlisted to assist the colonial government in restoring law and order as the colonial regime moved quickly against the Indo-Fijian strike leaders and Manilal was deported to India. In a dispatch to London, Fiji's Governor Rodwell justified the deportation order by stating that Manilal was 'regarded beyond all reasonable doubt as the prime mover in the agitation' (Tinker, 1974: 237). While Manilal was removed from the political scene, Indo-Fijian counter hegemony ignited in the cane fields of Western Viti Levu where, in January 1921, a strike began. The strike was led by a Sadhu (holy man) Basist Muni, who challenged the hegemony of the Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) and asked for wage increases across the board for all Indo-Fijian labourers. The Sadhu argued that the CSR made huge profit from the exploitation of Indian workers by paying them very low wages, which caused widespread poverty and social problems in the community including high rates of suicide, violence and social fragmentation. The colonial regime intervened and persuaded the CSR to grant moderate wage increases to appease the Indo-Fijian farmers. But the strike, which lasted for nearly six months, quickly turned political when Sadhu demanded an unconditional return of Manilal from exile and called for the immediate release of 1920 Indo-Fijian strikers from the Suva prison. The colonial authorities labelled Sadhu an anti-government agitator and he was also deported from Fiji to India. Before his deportation, Sadhu predicted that lightning would strike the government building in Suva and burn it to the ground and it so happened that his prediction miraculously came true. Sadhu



was extremely popular among Indo-Fijians and oral tradition has it that Sadhu was not only a political activist but could foretell the future and as, a result, he is regarded as a holy man by many Indo-Fijians in Fiji today.

The two strikes by Indo-Fijians hardened colonial attitudes towards the community and its leaders as Europeans turned to indigenous Fijian chiefs for support. At first, the Indo-Fijians were seen by the colonial government as mere docile peasants but after the strikes of 1920-21, the Indo-Fijians became a political 'problem' for the colonial authorities, who were concerned that anti-establishment agitation based on revolutionary ideas, mostly imported from the Indian subcontinent, could influence indigenous Fijians. Fiji's colonial administrators argued persistently that Indians wanted to establish an Indo-Fijian government in the colony and had ambitions to politically dominate the Europeans. In 1921, there were 60,634 Indians in the colony of Fiji but by 1936 the number had increased to 85,002 (Tinker, 1974: 199). The strikes of 1920-21 politicised the Indo-Fijian community, which agitated for Indo-Fijian representation on the Legislative Council. The colonial administration acquiesced to the demands of Indo-Fijian agitators and Badri Maharaj was appointed to the Council. However Maharaj was despised by the Indo-Fijian community due to his close affiliation with Europeans and by 1929 the colonial government further conceded to Indo-Fijian demands for political representation and permitted the election of Vishnu Deo, James Ramchandrar and Parmanand Singh to the Legislative Council of Fiji. After assuming office, the newly elected Indian members demanded political equality with the Europeans via a common roll franchise based on representation by population as opposed to ethnic allocations by the Fiji Governor. The Indo-Fijians, however, were not after political control but wanted a political system where their social and economic aspirations were realised via proper representative government. By leaving Indo-Fijians on the fringes of the colonial political system, the colonial administration heightened their sense of insecurity, which had been building up since the end of indenture. Many Indo-Fijians were working on European-owned sugar estates and did not own any land. They wanted access to agricultural land on reasonable lease terms. According to historian Doug Munro, the agitation by the Indo-Fijians against the colonial authorities aimed to regain their respect (izzat) following the hell (narak) of plantation life by seeking political equality and (unsuccessfully) demanding a common roll voting system (Munro, 2005: 95). The constant political agitation of Indo-Fijians against authority after indenture was a testament that the community wanted to establish its cultural place in Fiji and that the only way to achieve this was through political equality with Europeans and access to indigenous Fijian land.

On the one hand, the militarisation of the counter hegemonic movement of the Indian nationalists created concerns within the colonial government in Fiji as to the loyalty of Indo-Fijians to the Empire and the Commonwealth. Whilst many Indo-Fijians were against Japanese expansionism in the Asia Pacific region, Indo-Fijians born in India, after engineering themselves to occupy prominent positions in the farming sector in Fiji, saw the war as an opportunity to strike at the heart of the colonial administration. In fact, statements by some Indian nationalist politicians such as Subhas Chandra Bose following the formation of the Indian National Army (INA) further eroded the credibility of Indo-Fijian leaders, because many supported the anti-British movement. Nevertheless, and despite the grave misgivings as to Indo-Fijian loyalty noted above, the colonial government wanted to enlist Indo-Fijians for

military service in the Solomon Islands; but the recruitment of Indo-Fijian soldiers was short-lived as Indo-Fijian leaders pushed for equality between Indo-Fijians and Europeans in Fiji during the war.

In 1939, one of the leading Indo-Fijian religious groups, Arya Samaj, formed the Fiji Kisan Sangh, a cane-grower's organisation, which worked with the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) to improve the wages and working conditions of Indo-Fijian cane farmers. However, some activist Indo-Fijian leaders, including A.D. Patel and Rudranand, denounced the Kisan Sangh as being too timid in their negotiations with CSR and formed the militant Maha Sangh in 1941. According to Kelly and Kaplan (2001: 213) there were greater intra-communal dynamics at play since 'Kisan Sangh had alienated Gujarati merchants after several public attacks on them', including convincing cane farmers not to pay debts held by this merchant class. In the middle of the war, Kisan Sangh started negotiations with the CSR on wage issues and by 1943 efforts on a negotiated outcome collapsed as rival Maha Sangh accused the Kisan Sangh of being weak and not aggressive enough in their bargaining strategy and called for an immediate harvest boycott. According to Brij Lal (2011: 58), 'stories of Patel's Gujarati greed, his vain political ambition, and his ruthless manipulation of the genuine grievances of the ignorant cane farmers for his own ends form a part not only of the colonial record, and even some scholarly accounts, but also of the folklore in parts of the cane belts of western Viti Levu'. In addition, the manipulation of the farmers by Maha Sangh and the strike during the height of the war convinced both the colonial government and the indigenous Great Council of Chiefs that Indo-Fijians, and in particular their leaders, were disloyal and manipulative. Worse perhaps was the refusal by many Indo-Fijians to enlist in the military as opposed to indigenous Fijians, who contributed heroically to the war effort in the Pacific. Not only did Indo-Fijians refused to enlist for service overseas in protest over unequal pay and conditions, they also engaged in a long and bitter strike in sugar areas over cane prices (Lawson, 1991: 167). The prevailing mood of the authorities in Fiji towards the Indo-Fijians is articulated by colonial writer J.C. Furnas.

Indians usually disdains marriage with the Fijian, relies too much on the new Indian nationalism for emotional ballast, and spend much of his political energy toward social and economic gains, directly at the Fijian's expense. During World War II, Indians made unhappily sure of being detested by staging large-scale strikes in the sugar fields. As yet, only a limited stratum of Indian young people tries to consider themselves people of Fiji, rather than Indians justifiably sulking under exploitation in a foreign land (Furnas, 1989: 109).

Furnas argued that indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian interests were diametrically opposed and that Indo-Fijian non-participation in the war was due to a lack of attachment to Fiji. In fact, Indo-Fijian counter hegemony in the form of a prolonged strike in 1943 severely undermined the Indo-Fijian relationship with the colonial government and this impacted on the Indo-Fijian political position in the country as Fiji advanced towards independence in the 1960s. Also of concern was the increasing Indo-Fijian population, which had become a majority in the colony before the end of the war and, after the war, Europeans in Fiji emphasised that the Indo-Fijian population boom could result in political domination. European members of the Legislative

Council – A.A. Ragg, R.W. Robson, and A.W. Macmillan – suggested repatriating all Indo-Fijians to India, beginning with sixteen-year-old males and fourteen year old females (Lal, 1992: 143). The efforts of Europeans in Fiji to repatriate Indo-Fijians failed but, as anticipated, the European members of the legislative Council, understanding post-war population realities, resurrected debates on the Deed of Cession of 1874, arguing that any transfer of political power would be from the colonial government to indigenous chiefs, as agreed by the Crown before taking over the administration of the colony in 1874. As noted by Colin Newbury (2011: 41), the purpose of the anti-Indo-Fijian rhetoric was to ‘preserve the power of the chiefs’ and the ‘communal system’ and to reaffirm the alignment of indigenous Fijian and European interests.

Indo-Fijian counter hegemony against the colonial government and the CSR continued with the strike in the cane fields in 1960. This strike became political when Indo-Fijian leader A.D. Patel pushed for security of Indo-Fijian farmer tenure on land leased from indigenous Fijian land-owning units. Moreover, Patel advocated a common roll electoral system and independence from Britain, which were seen by the newly established indigenous lobby group, the Fijian Association, as further ploys by Indo-Fijians to use their majority to force the issue on the indigenous Fijian leadership. In 1964, A.D. Patel, James Madhavan, and S.M. Koya formed the Federation Party. Despite overwhelming support for the Federation among Indo-Fijians, some Indo-Fijian leaders attacked A.D. Patel for forcing the issues of independence and land tenure on indigenous Fijian leaders. Indo-Fijians, particularly the descendants of indentured labourers, demanded full Fiji citizenship and political rights following independence and further suggested that those who had emigrated to Fiji after the end of indenture and on an Indian passport should be placed on a temporary visa and refused full Fijian citizenship.

Such calls from within the Indo-Fijian community caused bitter divisions and concerns within the community, especially among Indian migrants who came to Fiji after indenture, mostly Gujaratis and Sikhs. Debates concerning immigration status, independence, and disputes in the cane fields left an impression of a community divided along social, cultural and linguistic lines, united only occasionally by its insecurities, an abiding sense of injustice, and the quest for political equality and self-respect (Macdonald, 1982: 182). In 1969, A.D. Patel died and the mantle of Indo-Fijian leadership fell on Fiji-born Siddiq Koya, who came under immense political pressure to continue with the hard-line politics of Patel. By 1970 Koya was willing to work with the indigenous Fijian leadership, resulting in the finalisation of the 1970 Constitution. Even though the constitution was based on communal representation and had a limited number of national seats, it provided, nevertheless, equal political participation, based on a First Past the Post Voting System; but as Brij Lal noted (2008: 79), ‘there were hints of dark clouds over the horizon’, mainly due to the lack of interaction between Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians during the colonial period. These dark clouds not only carried forward tensions between Indo-Fijian leaders and Europeans but established new zones of conflict between Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians.

## Post-Independence: Indo-Fijian counter hegemony

On Independence Day, 10 October 1970, a majority of Indo-Fijians were Fiji-born and hence a new strand was added to Indo-Fijian counter hegemony. Whilst land and political equality with Europeans remained at the forefront of Indo-Fijian concerns, the new Indo-Fijian political leadership was focused strongly on political equality with indigenous Fijians and pushed for land leases from indigenous landowners on reasonable terms. However, these issues caused concern among indigenous Fijian chiefs and indigenous nationalists who were now part of the Fijian elite, which “was in many ways continuous with that which was created during the colonial period” (Jolly, 1992: 348). The first general election in post-independence Fiji was held in 1972 after indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian leaders agreed to defer elections for two years. However, this arrangement was an understanding not shared by many indigenous Fijians, who saw Indo-Fijians as untrustworthy, and their leaders as seeking opportunities to usurp indigenous Fijian land by establishing political hegemony.

The 1972 Fiji elections highlighted two ongoing issues for Fiji: the Federation Party’s support base was entirely Indo-Fijian and their political leaders were pushing for political equality by emphasising the utility of a common roll and land reform policies, whereas Ratu Mara’s Alliance Party sought to reinforce its communal support through a structure of patronage and control over the native Fijian community that had been built up by the chiefly oligarchy prior to independence (Howard 1991: 81). Following the defeat of the National Federation Party in the 1972 general election, the party pressured Prime Minister Ratu Mara to implement a common roll electoral system. The Indo-Fijian intent behind the push for a common roll was essentially to entrench political equality, but indigenous nationalists saw the move as an attempt to politically subordinate the indigenous community and alienate indigenous land by stealth. By 1977, the National Federation Party secured itself as the communal voice of Indo-Fijians in Fiji and in a surprise turn of events, the Federation won the 1977 general elections following divisions among indigenous Fijians. The National Federation Party victory was short-lived’ as swift manoeuvres by Governor-General Ratu Sir George Cakobau shattered the Indo-Fijian dream of political equality. Further, for two days Federation party officials argued relentlessly on their next steps and one of the newly elected Indo-Fijian members, Jai Ram Reddy, publicly stated that there was nobody in the National Federation Party with the stature to lead the country (Ali, 1979: 79). Unable to form a government, the National Federation Party fractured along religious lines. As Ahmed Ali (1978: 152) observed, the Hindu-Muslim split in the second general election in 1977 highlighted the political role of ‘religious identity’ among Indo-Fijians and, moreover, of the ongoing emphasis on intra-communal differences between sub-groups, such as South Indians, Gujaratis, Indo-Muslims and North Indian Hindus, which was used ‘to gain votes’ and mobilise support. The party was unable to function as a result of these divisions and as a result lost the second general election in 1977, when Ratu Mara’s Alliance Party clawed back indigenous support to win government once again. Immediately afterwards, Jai Ram Reddy became the leader of the National Federation Party after Siddiq Koya lost his seat due to factional in-fighting. Reddy was unable to stop the political machinery of Ratu Mara’s Alliance Party and lost the 1982 elections, even after forming an alliance with the regional indigenous separatist movement, the Western

United Front (WUF). The defeat of the National Federation Party in 1982 was based on two factors: one was the 'toilet remark' allegedly made against the chiefs in the Alliance Party by Jai Ram Reddy at an election rally; and the other was the misinterpretation of the ABC Four Corner's comments were construed as suggesting Prime Minister Ratu Mara has links to cannibalism, thus fanning indigenous Fijian anger against the National Federation Party (Lal, 2010: 220-235).

By 1985, Indo-Fijian frustration with the National Federation Party had grown because the party was highly factional and as a result dysfunctional. In the absence of an effective opposition, the trade union movement in Fiji stepped up and formed the Fiji Labour Party, which emphasised growing economic inequality and the elite focus of the ruling political class. The Fiji Labour Party had two winning combinations: multiracial union members from more than one race, who were successful in mobilising the grass roots and in highlighting many corrupt activities of the Alliance Party, including dubious dealings by indigenous Fijian chiefs. For the first time in Fiji history, Fiji's divided ethnic groups were questioning authority, and more importantly the policies of the Alliance Party, which had ruled Fiji from 1970 to 1987. In the 1987 elections, the Fiji Labour Party formed a coalition with the National Federation Party and successfully dislodged Ratu Mara's Alliance Party from power. The success for multiracial unity was shattered by the coups of 1987 that were executed to re-establish the hegemony of the Alliance Party. Indo-Fijians were targeted by the coup supporters at all levels of government and the pro-indigenous Fijian Taukei Movement rioted in the streets of Suva, ending Fiji's 'façade of democracy' (Alley, 1987: 489-496; Sanday, 1989: 116-131). Indo-Fijians migrated overseas in large numbers as a result of the coups and the the Fiji military, with the support of Methodist fundamentalists, imposed a Sunday ban, which outlawed all commercial activities on Sundays.

The 1987 coups devastated the Indo-Fijian community as many fled the country, leaving behind friends and family in utter emotional despair. Most of the reasons for this outward migration were based on securing a better future for Indo-Fijians; but there was collective concern that Fiji had needlessly embarked on a coup culture where harassment, detention and intimidation of democratic forces was the norm, including racial programming aimed at excluding Indo-Fijians from all positions of influence and authority. Moreover, Indo-Fijians saw the 1987 coups as a reinstatement of the indigenous Fijian nationalist ethnic state, where Indo-Fijians had no choice but to migrate overseas or live under the draconian Sunday ban, military rule, and the racist ideology of radical members of the Methodist Church. Intolerance in post-coup Fiji was very well organised and orchestrated. Many Hindu and Muslim places of worship were routinely attacked by indigenous nationalist thugs and holy idols and religious books were desecrated. Uncontrolled indigenous nationalism and militarism became the defining mainstream political discourse as nationalists claimed exclusive control of the state with a multitude of decrees aimed at augmenting the power of the ethnic army, the hereditary chiefs and their nationalist allies, mostly business associates who had their own outmoded ethnic agenda of dominating and exploiting Indo-Fijian workers.

According to Mahendra Reddy, Manoranjan Mohanty and Vijay Naidu (2004: 1450), there was outward migration of mainly Indo-Fijian professional groups including architects, accountants,

teachers, medical workers and others, including electricians, audio and video technicians, investment advisors, finance analysts and economists, lawyers, union leaders, and academics.

Table 1: Emigration of Professional and Technical category, 1987-1999

Category	Total Loss 1987-1999	% Loss	Annual Average 1987-1999
Architects	1,439	20.9	110.7
Accountants	1,065	15.5	81.9
Teachers	2,125	30.9	163.5
Medical Workers	893	13	68.7
Others	1,347	19.6	103.6

**Source:** Reddy, Mohanty and Naidu (2004: 1450)

Whilst there was downward movement in the Indo-Fijian population, there was also deterioration in Indo-Fijian participation in the sugar industry, which had defined indentured labour and Indo-Fijian struggles for political equality. According to Narayan and Prasad (2005: 105), “since 1996 sugarcane production reached 4.3 million tonnes, sugarcane production continued to decline, reaching a low of 2.6 million tonnes in 2003. During the same time, not surprisingly, sugar production also declined, reaching a low of 294,000 tonnes in 2003.” Indo-Fijians in the 1990s were taking heed of the advice of National Farmers Union leader Mahendra Chaudhry that there were difficult days ahead for Indo-Fijian farmers on indigenous land. In an interview with *The Review* (August 1993: 29), Chaudhry argued that ‘Indo-Fijians will have to accept the reality that they must move from the land and find a livelihood elsewhere’.

While Chaudhry forewarned Indo-Fijian farmers to move off the land, Indo-Fijian struggles for political equality entered a strange and unpredictable era when the Fiji Labour Party supported the Prime Ministership of Sitiveni Rabuka following the 1992 election but later changed its mind when Rabuka remained uncommitted on three pressing issues: constitutional review, removal of Value Added Tax and developing a fair lease system for Indo-Fijian farmers. Rabuka’s non-commitment is partially explained by the tensions in the party between a faction against Rabuka, led by Josevata Kamikamica, and those who supported Rabuka as the coup leader. The other reason for a lack of commitment may be explained by Rabuka’s ongoing extra-marital affairs, which were popular discussions among Fiji’s gossip circles (Ramesh, 2016: 69-84). Rabuka was to some extent caught in between but was able to re-engineer and re-invent his political fortunes with the assistance of the National Federation Party leader Jai Ram Reddy following the 1994 general election.

As discussed, the NFU, led by Indo-Fijian leader Mahendra Chaudhry, was concerned about the expiry of land leases under the Agricultural Landlord and Tenants Act (ALTA) (Lal, 2000a: 111-134). In total 45 agricultural leases expired in 1997; 157 in 1998; 209 in 1999; 1622 in 2000; and 1762 in 2001. Indo-Fijians remained divided in the 1990s despite the successes of

the NFU. However by 1999, Indo-Fijians had snubbed the leader of the National Federation Party, Jai Ram Reddy, for engaging his party in a political partnership with Sitiveni Rabuka, who remains accused of causing enormous pain and suffering to the Indo-Fijian community in 1987. Ironically, it was Sitiveni Rabuka who fought off indigenous hardliners within his party to push through, with the support of Indo-Fijians, an internationally acceptable 1997 Constitution (Lal, 1998). It was under this constitution that the Fiji Labour Party won the 1999 general election and Mahendra Chaudhry became Fiji's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister. However, on 19 May 2000, armed gunmen incapacitated the Government of Mahendra Chaudhry (Lal, 2000b: 281-293). The crisis created by the armed hijacking of parliament had a far-reaching impact for Indo-Fijians in remote and rural areas, where support for the armed insurrection was strongest. A number of Indo-Fijians were attacked by indigenous Fijians in rural Fiji, including Muaniweni, Dawasamu, Wainibokasi, Dreketi, Korovou, and Tailevu. <sup>1</sup>A Tailevu farmer, whose home was ransacked and whose family was tied up and beaten, was shocked to learn that the indigenous thugs had detailed knowledge of his property and further alleged that such information could only have been provided by other Indo-Fijians. Many Indo-Fijians fled with their belongings to the Fiji Girit Centre in Lautoka. The Centre, which was the symbol of the celebration of Indo-Fijian culture in Fiji, was transformed into a refugee camp (Trnka, 2008).

The 2000 coup continued the oppression of the Indo-Fijian community started by the coups of 1987. Besides fleeing the island paradise, there was collective fear that indigenous nationalists were planning large-scale mass murder and violence against Indo-Fijians. These fears were reinforced by daily news of premeditated attacks against Indo-Fijians throughout rebel-held areas including in and around the Fiji parliament. A Suva taxi driver recalled that he was chased by a group of indigenous Fijian men who attacked his taxi with rocks; he barely escaped by driving quickly away from the mob. Other stories that were quite common among Indo-Fijians were tales of theft of livestock, especially in Dawasamu, Muweniveni, Nausori and Tailevu. The stolen livestock were used to perform pagan rituals by the George Speight group in parliament. Indo-Fijians were left on their own and while some fought back, many had no choice but to flee and seek refuge. Some Indo-Fijian families were shielded by indigenous Fijians from the Speight thugs and this highlights that not all indigenous Fijians supported the 2000 coup<sup>2</sup>.

After the August 2001 elections, an indigenous Fijian nationalist government led by Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase came to power in Fiji and immediately after taking office implemented the Social Justice Act 2001, which was considered by the Fiji Human Rights Commission as discriminatory against Indo-Fijians. According to Cottrell and Ghai, 'the Commission analysed all 29 programs appended to the Social Justice Act and concluded that eight were acceptable as non-discriminatory on racial grounds; three were acceptable on

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<sup>1</sup> John McEvoy, *Columban Fathers, Nasese*, Suva, Fiji, pp. 1-5. Also see Social Action for Human Rights, 'The Civilian Takeover- Martial Law-Interim Administration and its effects on Indians.' Lautoka, Fiji, pp.1-14 and Trnka, S. (2008). *State of suffering: Political violence and community survival in Fiji*. Cornell University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Discussions on these issues are detailed in Ramesh, S. (2010) *History of Inter-Group Conflict and Violence in Fiji*, MA Thesis, University of Sydney <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/7248>

racial grounds but suffered from gender imbalance; nine were discriminatory in racial terms' (Cottrell & Ghai 2007: 240-41). In 2004, Indo-Fijians celebrated 125 years since their ancestors landed on the shores of Fiji from the Indian subcontinent. Brij Lal noted that the pride of the descendants of girmitiyas had been replaced by despair and dejection. Since the coups of 1987, which deposed a government in which Indo-Fijians had appropriate representation for the first time in their history, some 80,000 people have left, the best and the brightest, taking with them skills and talents the country can ill afford to lose (Lal 2004: 3). Lal's assessment is supported by Carmen Voigt-Graf (2008: 86-87), who argues that many Indo-Fijians moved overseas and 'Australia hosts the largest population of Indo-Fijians, estimated to be more than 40,000'. Satendra Nandan, an Indo-Fijian academic, argues passionately that indentured labourers and their industrious descendants contributed to protecting the indigenous Fijian way of life. According to Nandan:

I know of no people anywhere who, as a migrant community, gave whatever they had to protect the way of life of an indigenous community; who never killed a single native person to steal an acre of their land; or attempted to convert or crush their systems of belief and faith; who through their toil, sweat and tears, made a bankrupt colony into a prosperous country (Nandan 2005: 7).

Auckland-based writer Rajendra Prasad argues that Indo-Fijians were persecuted since indenture and this persecution continues with the massive displacement of Indo-Fijian farmers from land leased from Fijians, unemployment, the rising cost of goods and resultant poverty, all of which has contributed to a sudden rise in suicide in the Indo-Fijian community (Prasad 2006: 262). Moreover, Indo-Fijian insecurity was further heightened by the non-inclusion of the Fiji Labour Party in a multiparty cabinet from 2001 to 2006, as stipulated under section 99 of the 1997 Constitution. After the May 2006 elections, Qarase invited nine Fiji Labour Party members to join his cabinet. Before the election, there were reports that the approval rating of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase remained very low among Indo-Fijians, who largely saw his government's policies as promoting indigenous nationalism similar to the ideas promoted by the George Speight group in 2000. However, following the 2006 election, analyses by Shailendra Singh and Som Prakash (2006: 72) showed that Indo-Fijians were warming up to the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) government, with a 53 per cent approval rating among Indo-Fijians. However, in August 2006, Qarase insisted on reintroducing bills which the Indo-Fijians felt violated their political rights and as a result his popularity declined as many Indo-Fijians pressured members of the Fiji Labour Party to withdraw from the multiparty government.

Indo-Fijian counter hegemony in the period between 2000 and 2006 was focused on the discriminatory policies of the SDL government and a prolonged legal battle over the multiparty cabinet (Connell 2007: 86-87). The counter hegemonic movement against the indigenous nationalists was led by the Fiji Labour Party and its leader Mahendra Chaudhry, who wanted strong Indo-Fijian advocacy in the multiparty government; but indigenous nationalists within the government wanted to keep Indo-Fijians locked in minor cabinet portfolios because they had plans to bring in legislation to pardon individuals involved in the 2000 nationalist coup. The actions of the SDL members infuriated the military and in



December 2006, the government was deposed in a bloodless coup. After the coup the Commander of the military, Voreqe Bainimarama, enacted a number of policies, including the 2013 Constitution, that aimed at providing equal political rights to Indo-Fijians and access to indigenous Fijian land on reasonable lease conditions: two of the most pressing issues for the Indo-Fijian community since the end of indenture.

## Conclusion

Indo-Fijian counter hegemony started during indenture as a means of resisting the British colonial authorities; and its epicentre was the incessant exploitation of Indian women by white men. However, following the end of indenture, counter hegemony took the form of more direct action with the municipal workers' strike in 1920 and the sugar harvest boycott in 1921. The growing militancy of Indo-Fijians forced the colonial authorities to include Indo-Fijian representatives in the Legislative Council, but Indo-Fijian activism in the sugar industry continued, in particular against the Colonial Sugar Refining Company at the height of the second world war. Concerned by Indo-Fijian activism, Europeans in Fiji started to actively court their indigenous Fijian counterparts and established an anti-Indo-Fijian political bloc that argued for indigenous Fijian political hegemony. Many of the divisive ideas of the colonial period continued after independence as Indo-Fijians pushed for political equality and fair land lease terms. However, the Indo-Fijian leadership found itself facing off with indigenous chiefs and their nationalist support base and it was not until the mid-1980s that multiracial trade unions emerged as a non-ethnic political force in the form of the Fiji Labour Party, which won the 1987 general election. In response, the old guard re-grouped and, with the assistance of the military, deposed the multiracial government. Indo-Fijians were devastated and many left for a better life abroad. However, Indo-Fijians reconfigured their counter hegemony strategies with the forceful emergence of the National Farmers Union under the leadership of Mahendra Chaudhry, who challenged the indigenous nationalist government and led the Fiji Labour Party to victory in the 1999 election; but despite a new progressive constitution, the indigenous nationalists again re-grouped behind George Speight and deposed the Chaudhry government and unleashed a reign of terror against Indo-Fijians in rural Fiji. Many more Indo-Fijians fled overseas, while others were stranded in refugee camps. A pro-nationalist government came into existence after the 2000 coup, but the relationship between the government and the military soured, resulting in another coup in 2006, led by Voreqe Bainimarama, who restored Indo-Fijian political rights and put in place policies for a fair land lease and rental system.

The Indo-Fijian counter-hegemony in Fiji follows a neo-Gramscian social trajectory of strikes, boycotts, disruptions and protests. As Persaud (2016) highlighted in his analysis of counter hegemonic social forces in Guyana, the counter hegemony in Fiji was ethnic in its makeup and Indo-Fijians challenged European domination and then agitated for political equality. These efforts continued into post-independence Fiji, where Indo-Fijian leaders led protests and disruption against indigenous Fijian chiefs and indigenous nationalists. The Indo-Fijian strategy was embedded in historical structures (Cox, 1981) of social mobilisation that was harnessed during indenture and developed into new meaning-making political discourses (Jessop, 2004)

after indenture as Indo-Fijians carved their unique identity, culture and social relations in their adopted country.

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