‘The World becomes Stranger, the Pattern More Complicated’: Culture, Identity and the Indo-Fijian Experience

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From the 19th to the early 20th centuries, over one million Indians went out as indentured labourers to ‘King Sugar’ plantation colonies across the globe. Their descendants constitute an important part of the larger mosaic of the contemporary Indian diaspora. Whenever we, of that indentured diaspora, meet at international conferences and workshops or during our incessant global travels, we instinctively recognize a certain affinity between ourselves: a shared history and heritage, a collective memory of suffering and servitude of our forebears, a certain unmistakeable egalitarian ethos, and an impatience with the protocol and hierarchy so pervasive in the Indian subcontinent. We carry within us, to varying degrees, fragments of old Indian culture but one also shaped by the realities and experience of our homelands across the globe. ‘We are NRI’s’ we say, not ‘Non-Resident Indian’, but ‘Not Really Indian’.

Along with the familiar points of convergence we also recognize the important shades of difference between us, measured by the extent to which we retain aspects of Indian culture (language, religion, music, art, food, fashion) and the degree to which we have embraced non-Indian values and traditions in our individual and collective lives. Prompted by my experience of travel in and reflection on the Indian indentured diaspora over the last two decades, I now seek to understand the distinctive features of my own culture and identity and the forces which have shaped them, things that connect me to and disconnect me from other diasporas. I seek to understand both the text as well as the context of Indo-Fijian identity formation during the fifty years from the end of indenture in 1920 to independence in 1970, with some concluding comments about future directions.

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The Context of Indenture

Indenture everywhere involved rupture and reconstitution, but their pace and pattern differed from place to place (Lal, 1996: 167–188). The fragments of ancestral culture the migrants brought with them were lost quicker in some places than in others. Western values and practices were introduced and embraced or adapted to different degrees in different places. The patterns of change depended on a number of factors (Jayawardena, 1968). The timing and the nature of recruitment and migration from India and the frequency of contact with the ancestral homeland was one. The size of the immigrant population mattered. Smaller numbers intensified the pressure to assimilate, as in some of the smaller West Indian islands. The opportunity and facility for cultural reproduction was influential: the bigger the critical mass of the emigrant population, the better the prospects for social reproduction. Perhaps the most important of all was the policy of the host society, whether it encouraged outward mobility and the breaching of boundaries or discouraged interaction and cross-cultural relationships.

In Fiji, there was no 'open market' for cultural exchange among the different communities. There, each of the three principal groups, the Fijians, Indians and Europeans, were confined to their own compartments, and cross-cultural interaction was virtually non-existent. Separate and unequal was the order of the day. Each group therefore had to rely on its own cultural resources for sustenance and reproduction. For the Indians, this meant building upon the remnants of the remembered past of their indentured forebears. This is in contrast to other places such as Guyana where, writes Chandra Jayawardena, 'There was free shopping in the cultural market place and preferences were influenced by the perceived advantages of English culture in the wider society' (Jayawardena, 1966, 223). A distinct 'Indian' sensibility has persisted in Fiji far more than it has in other places, and it is a direct consequence of the colonial Fijian policy of racial segregation.

In 1879, Fiji was the last major importer of Indian indentured labour. By the time indentured emigration ceased there in 1916, some sixty thousand migrants had been transported under a five-year 'Agreement' (girmit) which stipulated the terms and conditions of employment on the plantations and the conditions for a return passage back to India. They could return at their own expense at the end of five years of service or at then of ten at government expense. The migrants were a representative cross-section of rural Indian society caught in the maelstrom of change brought about by the consequences of British revenue and land policies and by the vicissitudes of nature. Internal migration was a notable but often unacknowledged feature of rural Indian