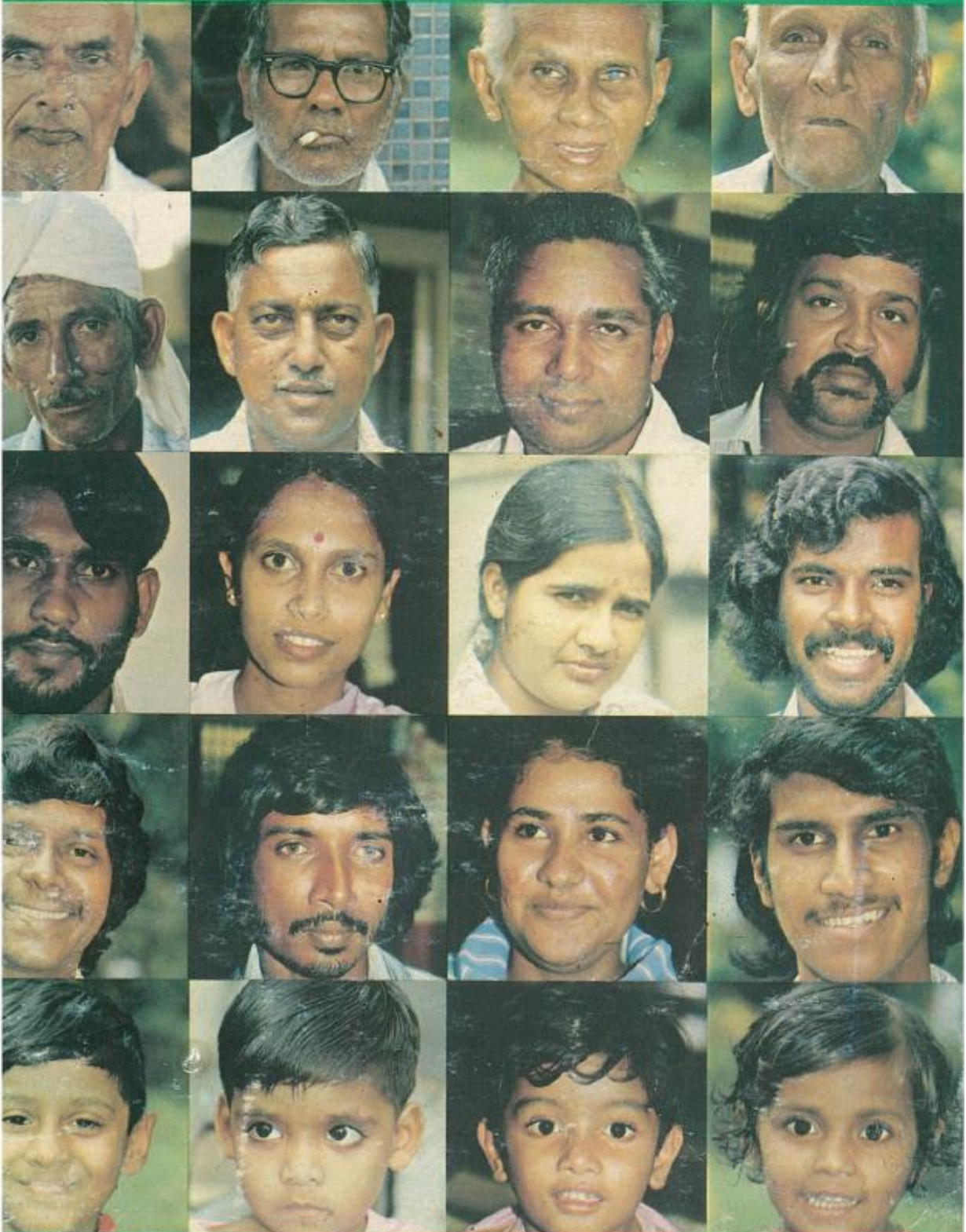


G i r m i t



A CENTENARY ANTHOLOGY 1870-1970

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FIJI INDIAN CULTURE IN FIJI

By Vijay Naidu

In spite of the numerous divisions that separate them into sub-cultural groups, religious groups, status and interest groups that manifest themselves in a complex of factions in almost all aspects of their existence, the Indians in Fiji are seen as a people who share a common way of life to an extent to justify a distinct ethnic label. Apart from having a common place of origin, sharing physical characteristics and some cultural traits, perhaps the most important factor in their being perceived as a separate section in the multi-ethnic society of Fiji has been the practice, carried over from colonial times of putting Fiji Indians together in a category for political and administrative purposes.

The early migrants who brought with them the peasant cultures of India were carriers of 'Indian culture' in a limited sense. They were young, came from particular regions of India, were of predominantly middle order agricultural castes, and were put into circumstances in which there was no possibility of duplication of India-Indian cultures. Most were illiterate and their connection with India ended in a very real sense on the day the grant ship left the port of departure. Social groups on the basis of caste disappeared, though not entirely, and the shortage of women to men compelled the early migrants to marry across religious differences. The broad communal kinship groupings found in several Indian village gave way to more and more individualistic considerations in the cut-throat indenture system.

Fiji Indians are divided into two broad cultural categories reinforced by visible physical differences. Recruitment of Indian immigrants began in North India but spread to South India by the end of the last century. The 'Culcuttias' or 'Culcutta Walahs' who came from Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh through the immigration depot of Culcutta were light-skinned and spoke village Hindustani. The 'Madrassis' who were usually dark of skin and without the sharp features of their North Indian counterparts were drawn from places around Madras and from Malabar, North Arcot, Vizakapatnam and Tanjore in South India and spoke Tamil, Telegu and Malyalam.

For all these sub-cultural groups 'Fiji Hindi' has emerged as the lingua-franca. Though this language is looked down upon by those versed in India 'shudh' Hindi, it is in widespread currency. It is basically village Hindi but with considerable changes in

accent as well as numerous words from both English and Fijian.

The religions of the Fiji Indians distinguish them from the other ethnic categories. They are generally either Hindus or Muslims, only a few being Christians. Each one of these religions are divided into a number of sects.

The Hindu Fiji Indians celebrate Diwali, Holi, and the birth of Lord Krishna. Diwali is the colorful festival of lights and Holi is characterised by *chautals* (a special kind of song) and the playing with *rung* or dye-water. Other religious occasions are also marked by appropriate rituals. Most homes have shrines where the family gathers for prayers. The local Brahmins who are the Pundits officiate in marriages and pujas like the *Katha*. It is in the realm of religion that caste is especially marked. Pundits are Brahmins, though restrictions on their association with others are not overtly practised. Ideally they are not supposed to eat meat. Many Hindus do not eat meat on certain days especially Tuesdays and Fridays. Fasting too is not uncommon particularly amongst women. Those wishing some objectives may also take vows in order to achieve their goals. Another practice that is to be found in many areas is the 'fire-walking' ceremony which is the honour of Kali, a Hindu Goddess. Though fire-walking is associated with the South Indians, it is not exclusively a South Indian Hindu preoccupation.

The Sikhs have their own temples (Gurudwaras) where they carry out prayer meetings and read their holy book.

The Muslims have their mosques where they gather for regular prayers especially on Fridays. Amongst the more prominent practices associated with Islam in Fiji is the annual monthly fasting-period of Ramadan followed by Eid when *Sawain* or vermicelli is consumed in the company of visiting relatives and friends. Bakra Eid is marked by the usual *niyaaz* (prayers) and apportionment of meat for distribution to relatives. Prophet Mohammed's Birthday is also celebrated. Orthodox Muslims eat only Halal meat and pray five times a day (*namaaz*).

Fiji Indians are also distinguished by their institutions of family and-marriage. While the individual partners in marriage today do have

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INDIAN CULTURE IN FIJI

There are many legends on Krishna's childhood. He is said to be very fond of butter. Many ballets have been very popular because of his acts of stealing butter. As a child he is known as a "Makhan Chor" (Butter thief).

Krishna in his childhood killed the ferocious Kalia Snake.

Pictures on these pages, taken by Dinesh Pant, show some of the scenes in a ballet based on one of the legends on Krishna:

When Indra the God of Rain was distressed by the activities of the demon NARKASUR, he requested Krishna to kill the demon.

Krishna who in his childhood days plays with Gopies (women folks of cattle owners) now goes to the battle field with his wife, Satyabhama. He is armed with bow and arrows and his favourite weapon, Sudershan Chakra, a toothed wheel that flies off his hands and returns to him.

The ballet is performed by Satya Narayan Charkia of the Indian Cultural Centre in Suva.



Vrunka Gopal acts as a Gopi---
she is one of the friends of the
child Krishna. She danced the
MAHARAS with young
Krishna



A scene depicting Krishna (Mahendra Sunder) and his
wife Satyabhama (Nalin Maharaj) going off to the
battle field. Krishna is seen holding his Sundershan
Chakra while his wife carries the bow.



Leena Venital as the child Krishna
in the ballet is pictured as a flute
player. In the ballet he steals butter,
goes to the forest with his cow,
plays with his friends and kills
the snake Kalia.

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considerably more say on matters of to whom they should marry, relatives continue to influence one's choice. Arranged marriages persist particularly in rural areas. The age of marriage, is in the late teens and early twenties. Marriage today generally takes place within sub-cultural categories and religious groups. Strict marriage ties are observed especially by the more clannish Gujeratis and Punjabis. Particularly the former, who have until recently gone back to India to find spouses for their sons and daughters.

The Hindu ceremony culminates in the actual marriage by a pundit in the brightly coloured and lit, if not gaudy Mandab. For a Muslim wedding, vows are made in private, (Nika) in the presence of a Maulvi. In either case a reception is held and people are entertained and fed in a shed (maro or pandal) built for the occasion.

There is a trend towards nuclear family households with parents and unmarried children but in many areas, both rural and urban, the joint-family household persists. The financial and culinary arrangements may differ from homestead to homestead but a number of family members including parents, grandparents and both married and unmarried siblings may reside under the same roof or compound. The pressure in the urban area is for smaller families and this is particularly exhibited by the socially mobile, at the same time, however, the astronomical costs of housing results in families staying together in the family house. Sons are given a freer hand than daughters, the latter are kept under surveillance especially if they are in their teens.

While Fiji Indians have been characterised as individualistic, like people anywhere, they recognize kinship ties and obligations. Many sub-cultural and status groups recognise wide kinship networks. This is particularly true of the older generation. In times of life-crisis including births, marriages, and deaths the wider kinship network is activated. Other occasions of gathering at one's parents house is not uncommon. Most Indo-Fijians celebrate not only their own religious festivals but also recognise Christmas as a time of family gathering and rejoicing.

Indo-Fijians are also distinguished by their dress and dietary habits. The women usually wear saris. Those who do not wear saris, wear skirts and blouses as well as jeans, reverting to the traditional sari on important social occasions. Men wear Western clothes. Few old men wear the dhoti—a strip of cloth wrapped around the waist and between the legs.

Pundits wear dhotis when officiating in religious rituals but even they are changing their attire. Some use robes these days. The Punjabi speaking Sikhs wear turbans but once again many younger Sikhs do not.

In the area of leisure and sports Fiji Indians have been especially involved in playing and promoting soccer. Originally the body that fostered soccer was the Fiji Indian Football Association. This sport, however, has become the most multi-racial game played in Fiji. Today in many cases the representative sides and many clubs are predominantly non-Indian. Fiji Indians are also involved in all the other games played in Fiji and this ranges from hockey and cricket to bowling and golf.

In the rural areas there has been an increase in various clubs and societies. Some of these are women's interest clubs, others are mandalis and informal Ramayan recital groups, while still others are action oriented development groups. Qawali and bhajans are very popular amongst farmers. The ability of those interested in developing local Fiji Indian cultural expression is reduced by their lack of organizational expertise and the failure of Radio Fiji to encourage and stimulate such expressions. The Indian Cultural Centre in Suva is run essentially for the benefit of Indian nationals and the town-dwelling Gujeratis and other Fiji Indians who feel the need to emulate India-Indian ways. Many feel that 'true culture' is to be found in rural Fiji.

From this description of Fiji Indian culture, it can be said that in terms of their way of life, i.e. their culture, there is unity in diversity. This unity refers to the sharing of a common experience derived from the indenture period, the use of Fiji Hindustani as the common language amongst them, similar family organization, the sharing of culinary practices interests in sports and Indian movies. Diversity exists in sub-cultural practices, religion, and in linguistic differences, these will continue to give Fiji charming variety but at the same time provide it with a potential for cleavage.

Then there are the Gujeratis and the majority of the Punjabis who came as free migrants from north-west India. These newcomers mainly entered trade and commerce. The Gujeratis to-day own and operate the majority of shops and trade agencies in the urban centres of Fiji. The Punjabis have become retailers as well but are known for their large farms and money lending. Next to Indian nationals, these free migrants of their kinship ties have strong attachments with India.

A city takes shape



SUVA, in the early part of the Century



Building their own places of worship was an important stage of development for the Indian community. Here men and women gather to help build one of the first Hindu temples in Fiji.