

# THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF FIJI

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This paper attempts to cover the general social and economic issues in Fiji with special attention to the role of youth in the development process

## Historical background

In terms of background, it is necessary to give a sketch of the history and geography of Fiji.

Fiji consists of 300 islands in the mid-South Pacific, 100 of which are inhabited, comprising a total area of 7,055 miles. The two large islands are Vanua Levu and Viti Levu. Viti Levu is about 88 miles long and 64 miles wide, covering an area of 4001 square miles and accommodating two-thirds of Fiji's population. Vanua Levu, 2,137 square miles, is about 112 miles long with an average width of 20 miles.

The Fiji Islands were first sighted by Tasman in 1643 but the significance of his discovery was not then realised. Captain Cook visited the island in 1774 and Captain Wilson visited the Lau group in 1767. It was Captain Bligh, however, of the "Bounty", who recorded most of the islands. After this Fiji was known as the "Bligh Islands". Shipping companies became interested in Fiji in connection with the sandalwood trade. It was through these traders that firearms were introduced to the Fijian and rum and muskets became regular articles of trade.

Missionaries came first from Tonga and later from elsewhere. In 1854, Cakobau and other high chiefs were converted and thus became the champions of the missionaries. The religion of the king became the religion of the people. With this conversion, cannibalism and other savage practices ceased.

A confederacy was formed by the chiefs in 1865 but failed. New problems arose and there was no adequate system of government. The chiefs once again appealed to Britain to take over rule, although Britain had refused once before. Finally, on the 10th October, 1874, Fiji was proclaimed a possession of and dependent upon the British Crown.

Sugar began replacing cotton as the major crop. By 1885, indentured labourers from India were introduced to work in the cane fields and prosperity began to emerge. The indenture system was finally abolished in 1920. About 40,000 - 50,000 Indians were introduced to Fiji and only a very small number returned after their service. The Indian population doubled in 25 years and by 1945 the number of Indians exceeded the number of Fijians.

### The present situation

The present population is a little over half a million and is made up of:

Fijians	214,948
Indians	256,152
Europeans and part-Europeans	22,412
Chinese	5,388
Other Pacific races	13,162

Population density varies from 6,900 to the square mile (Suva city) to about 12 to the square mile. A large area is of mountainous jungle and is virtually uninhabited. The growth rate is high and it is significant that 47% of the population are under 15 years of age.

In terms of composition, the urban areas are mostly multi-racial. The Fijians generally live in close-knit villages scattered along the coast in river valleys, while the Indians, by contrast, live in separate homesteads on individual farms.

The pattern of employment is as disparate as the pattern of population. Only 3,716 Fijians are engaged in sugar cane growing as compared to 22,813 Indians. On the other hand, Fijians are engaged in subsistence or village agriculture. In commerce, 5,446 Indians are employed as compared with 1,301 Fijians. In professions such as accounting, pharmacy, medicine and law, Indians again are more numerous. Only in nursing and in ecclesiastical positions do the Fijians predominate.

Virtually 100% of the Fijians are declared Christian according to the last census, of whom 83% are Methodist and about 13% Roman Catholic. Among the Indians, 80% are Hindu and 15.4% Muslim. Only about 1.3% of the Indian population are Sikhs. The remainder are of other religious sects.

## Urbanisation

Urbanisation is a trend all over the world and this includes the Pacific. To take Fiji as an example, about one third of the population live in urban areas and about one fifth of the total live in Suva, the capital. Urban development in this area is largely a product of contact with the western world. There is a considerable increase in the percentage of the population which have drifted in to find employment outside agriculture. Inevitably a large number of people will drift to town to find new ways of making a living and thus a new way of life.

### Why do young people move to town?

There are obviously a great number of individual motivations but the following reasons seem to be somewhat general:

1. The attraction of what has been called the "bright lights" of the town: the excitement of urban life with its cinema, bars, recreational facilities, sports events, big shops etc.
2. The town is the only place where proper education is offered, at least at the secondary level; the type of education they have already received may develop in youth aspirations that can only be fulfilled in the town, e.g., individual independence, white collar jobs etc. This is especially true in Fiji where all the secondary schools are placed in the large urban areas, although future plans call for the dispersion of secondary and junior secondary schools in the rural areas.
3. The existence of employment and money giving access to a number of goods and satisfactions that are not available in a rural subsistence economy.
4. Freedom from the authority of chiefs, elders, parents, and the authoritarian culture of the village.

The problem of housing has led to the creation of a Housing Authority, which has attempted to build low-cost housing in urban areas. One example is the Raiwaqa Housing Estate in Suva with a population of over 12,000, of whom 7,000 are young people under the age of 21. These people are crowded into two and four storey high-rise apartments.

The availability of this housing has tended to quicken the process of urbanisation by encouraging more and more people to come to the city - where they discover there are no jobs for them. The Housing Authority talks about building so many "housing units" but never a word about creating communities. The planning of the Estate has ignored an integrated system of social services, recreation and parks (which are mostly mangrove swamps and drainage ditches) and the traditional Fijian way of life. Young people find themselves out on the streets with nowhere to go and nothing to do. Despair characterises those young people who have fled the countryside hoping to find new jobs in town, only to discover that there are no jobs for them. This is where they end up in committing undesirable acts.

Over the 10 years 1959-69, the total population increase was 38% while the urban population increase was 167%. In the city of Suva 40% of the population is under 15 years of age.

### Education

Education from primary to university level is available to people of all races in Fiji. It has been considered for a long time to have free and compulsory education in Fiji, but the Government resources are such that this is not yet possible. Although there is no policy for racial segregation in the schools of Fiji, segregation has taken place as a natural outcome of the fact that Fijians and Indians do not live together in communities, have different backgrounds and speak different languages.

An Education Commission in 1969 drew up a report on education in Fiji and focused on the weaknesses of the present system. The following are some of the vital points which the Commission singled out:

1. The operation of separate communal schools either allowed or persuaded by Government has failed to promote the cultural, social, economic, and political development of the several races in Fiji as a single nation.
2. In order to instil a sense of consciousness so vital for the building of a nation that is new, the learning experiences of Fijian children need some radical redirection. Much more emphasis needs to be placed on education for better understanding among all the races in Fiji. Children need to

read about their proud tradition, on which very little or nothing has been written, and also about the achievements of new independent countries.

3. There is a need for a more diversified type of education at the secondary level, in order to provide for the shortage of teachers, agricultural assistants, technologists, medical technicians, foremen and secretaries. For a developing country, secondary education is more crucial than higher education.

4. There is a large disparity at various levels in the number of examination passes between Fijians and Indians as various factors tend to hamper the education of the Fijians. These include, to mention a few, the geographical dispersion of Fijians so that the schools are not large enough for effective staffing, rural poverty, the social distractions and lack of privacy and study facilities in the "koro" (village). Other factors arise out of the traditional Fijian way of life, which militates against continued application to routine tasks. Authoritarian traditions are weakening but have not been replaced by a more autonomous discipline.

These factors of social change are reflected in the disparity between the performance of Indians and Fijians. A Fijian is well aware that at present he does not compete with the Indian in land utilisation, education, business, the professions, or any other field except sports, and it is depressing that the same pattern can be seen at the University of the South Pacific. This situation is not due to lack of intellectual ability on the part of Fijians but to difficulties in adjustment, especially in developing habits of sustained application to study in an environment where the student's time is not rigidly controlled for him as in boarding school.

Race relations appear to be harmonious, but for a newly independent country there is a great deal to be done to achieve a more viable multi-racial society. The language provides the main point of contact. Through common learning of the English language, the lingua franca, and also through multi-racial schools which are becoming more common but are mostly on the secondary level, the different races and nationalities are brought closer together.

## The role of youth in developing Fiji

Today there is a dramatic shift of interest, expectation, and life style among the youth of Fiji and this has challenged the youth serving organisations and the adult community generally.

The standardised formulae of the past are no longer acceptable to youth. When I am speaking of youth here, I am referring in particular to the ones who have committed themselves to what I formed as "youth activism" and have actively participated in the building of the nation. They do not want a say only in the decision-making process of youth organisations and service projects but also in the practices of their educational institutions and the government, and indeed in the very direction the society is taking. Their interests are focused more than they were ten years ago on services which contribute to social change. Many are no longer satisfied with the self-centred life but want to be involved in projects where they can get to know and work with people who are either underprivileged, ill, or live on the "dark side" of society.

Within the past few years, more attention has been given by some youth organisations to the needs of unemployed youths, particularly early school leavers. While a start has been made, much more needs to be done in this area of vocational training. The Y.W.C.A. in Fiji has taken the lead in running courses for school leavers in typing, cookery, child care, tourist guides and household workers. Nausori Youth Centre has also become involved in organising courses in welding and carpentry. Mrs. Elmyria Hull, a Vocational Consultant to the Y.W.C.A. describes the situation in Fiji as the following:

The need for job skill training courses for unemployed early school leavers and other young adults lacking in entry level employment skill was recognised early as a programme priority in the Fiji Y.W.C.A. While nearly all schools receive some Government assistance, the Government has stated that it cannot foresee the time when education will be free or compulsory in Fiji. Therefore the continued expansion of this course is even more urgent today according to the current increase in the number of early school leavers and the predicted increase in the next ten years. This group of potential semi-skilled and skilled workers is also handicapped by literacy limitation (and some are more literate in the second language than the first), an incapacity for long range planning, distracting

family and environmental problems, underdeveloped academic abilities and social immaturity. This training is carried out with the purpose of providing training in the basic job skills necessary for earning a living as related to current and future employment opportunities for: (a) early school leavers who would otherwise have no further educational opportunities; (b) young adults seeking employment or upgrading possibilities; (c) youths already in employment who have had no special training; (d) workers with some skill or experience who wish to improve their prospects or change employments.

An associated need is to create new job categories in a society of high-level youth unemployment. Both the Y.W.C.A. and Nausori Youth Centre are addressing this need by making new kinds of jewelry and selling them on the tourist market.

Youths and youth organisations have increased their voluntary service in the field of education during the past years. Diploma students have conducted night classes and helped in the supervision of study groups in schools near the University campus. Many have also participated in the running of youth organisations.

A new trend of social service by youth emerged last year. In a youth conference held last year, it was moved to accept and support the establishment of a voluntary service scheme which is to begin with the students and be a part of the Fiji Student Christian Movement, becoming an independent body at a later stage. The objective and aims of the scheme are:

1. To give appropriate service to people who are in need.
2. To promote understanding between the highly educated and the less and uneducated people of Fiji.
3. To promote cultural understanding among the different cultures in Fiji.
4. To localise the voluntary services given by overseas groups.

Six months after its establishment, a group of volunteer students from various colleges and institutions spent six weeks during their Christmas holidays in one of the outlying islands, helping to establish a new secondary school. The work done included the construction of teachers' quarters (under the supervision of students from technical institutes, with the villagers providing the labour), the cataloguing of books in the new library by University students, work on the school garden by agricultural students, and the teaching of health education to parents and the community by medical students.

The volunteers also returned with the answers to questionnaires which they had obtained from the rural community and submitted these to the Ministry of Social Services to give information on the needs and the required future development of this area. Many of these young people consider some form of social service as an urgent necessity for their personal growth. They believe it builds up their knowledge and experience and develops skills. Through co-operation in voluntary labour in backward areas, they find reality less remote. They become more mature as far as human relations are concerned and are confronted with the limits of possibility in realising their own ideas.

Looking at the future, I see that the youths, especially in youth organisations, the university, and colleges here in Fiji, have an important role to play in educating the adults to think as responsible citizens in an emerging nation. I have mentioned the human problem which faces the Fijian as he seeks to take his place in a new and much more competitive world along with other ethnic groups. There is a lack of cross-cultural studies. There is a need to change social attitudes and to narrow the gap between older and younger generations.

There is also a need to increase the productive capacity of individuals to meet the demand which the new nation is going to make upon them. I see that in a developing country like Fiji students and youth organisations can be a valuable resource. New organised extension programmes during the vacation period can give them the opportunity for involvement. Through their involvement in all these issues which are crucial to Fiji, the larger youth organisations are quickly presenting a positive image in the society.

The Government is indeed very much concerned with the increasing youth problems for it has recently set up a new

Ministry - the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Rural Development. This new Ministry is seeking the co-operation and help of all youth organisations in trying to meet the needs of the youth of Fiji. Discussions are currently going on with respect to a new National Youth Service which will involve a crash programme in vocational training. It is important to note that the Government is actively seeking the advice of the Fiji National Youth Council, a representative co-ordinating body of all national youth organisations, in implementing its plans. Through this policy of active consultation, it is seeking to involve youths in the decision-making process. It still remains to be seen as to how successful this new Ministry will be.