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Indian analyses of the current crisis in Fiji have been over-simplistic and do not adequately focus on the ethnic, regional, religious, economic and political dimensions of the problem.

In 1995, Fiji's (area 18,270 square kms) population was estimated at 772,891 with the Fijian natives constituting 49 per cent and the Indo-Fijians (descendants of Indian migrants) 46 per cent. The remaining five per cent consisted of the descendants of the migrants from Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific islands, China and Europe.

The Fijian natives themselves are not a culturally homogenous community, with those of the western areas of the country, with their Melanesian cultural influence, feeling alienated from those of the east, with their Polynesian (essentially Tongan) origin. Like the Indo-Fijians, the economically better-off natives of the west nurse a grievance that the natives of the east seek to exercise an excessive political influence not commensurate with their limited contribution to the economy.

This common grievance against the natives of the east, who often dominate the Great Council of the Chiefs, facilitates greater political accommodation between the Indo-Fijians and the natives of the west than has been possible with those of the east.

As part of their divide and rule policy, the British colonial rulers kept the Fijian natives, from the east as well as the west, excluded from industries (sugar), trade and commerce (largely reserved for the Indian migrants) and the Indo-Fijians from the military and the police.

The result: When Fiji became independent in 1970, the economic power was largely in the hands of the Indo-Fijians, but the power of the gun in the hands of the natives. Whenever there has been a clash of political and economic interests between the Indo-Fijians and the natives, the military (4,100 on active duty and 10,000 reservists plus 2,000 police) has always sought to intervene on the side of the natives.

Even today, 30 years after independence, the Fijian natives still constitute 98 per cent of the military. Why so? Are the Indo-Fijians reluctant to join the military in order to play their due role in the defence of their country or does the Fijian native officer class deliberately keep them excluded in order to safeguard the political interests of the natives? A convincing answer is not available.

In Mauritius, the descendants of the Indian migrants have been able to safeguard their political and economic rights because of their substantial presence in the military, the police and the security bureaucracy, but in Fiji, their virtually total absence from it and their consequent inability to enforce the subservience of the military to political control make it difficult for them to ensure that the military always acts only in the interests of the nation and not just the natives.

The initial troubles of the Prime Minister, Mr. Mahendra Chaudhry, duly-elected in May last year, but now deposed in a coup, with the military started with his decision last year to wind up the military-controlled Fiji Intelligence Service (FIS) and to entrust intelligence collection to the Indo-Fijian officers of the Police Special Branch, directly accountable to him, so that he had dependable means of ascertaining what the military was up to.

However, he could not implement the step since the Bill for the abolition of the FIS was rejected by the Senate, the upper House, which is dominated by the nominees of the Chiefs and the judiciary separately stayed the implementation.

The Fijian natives as well as the Indo-Fijians have to equally share the blame for failing to promote ethnic assimilation through joint schooling for the children and a feeling of "we, the people of Fiji" instead of "we, the Fijian natives" and "we, the Indo-Fijians".

In 1970, less than 10 per cent of the schools had a large mixed composition and there has been no substantial improvement since then in breaking the consequent ethnic mindset.

Consciousness of ethnic separatism is now being aggravated by a newly-emerging consciousness of religious separatism. In the Indo-Fijian community, the Hindus constitute 80 per cent of the number, the Muslims 15 per cent and the remaining are Sikhs and Christians. In the country's population as a whole, the Christians are in a majority (52 per cent) with the Hindus (38 per cent) far behind. Eight per cent are Muslims and the rest Sikhs and others.

Practically the entire Fijian native population and the descendants of the migrants from Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific islands, China and Europe are Christians, with 78 per cent of them Methodists, 8.5 per cent Catholics and the rest belong to other denominations.

Though the British ruled Fiji, their Anglican Church took little interest in proselytization, leaving the field largely open to Methodist missionaries from the USA.

Till today, religion has, fortunately, not come in the way of societal fusion, but there are disturbing indicators that it might in future. Small sections of the Fijian natives are calling for the proclamation of Fiji as a Christian State and there has been criticism by sections of the Indo-Fijians of alleged attempts by Methodist missionaries to convert poor Hindus to Christianity.

If the emerging feelings of religious separatism are not checked in time, ethnic tensions could be compounded by religious friction, with the "we, the Christians" and "we, the Hindus" feelings making political accommodation even more difficult than at present.

The Constitution and the laws of the country justifiably protect the land rights of the natives. Indo-Fijian sugar cane farmers cannot buy land, but can only take them on lease--initially for 10 years extendable twice, thus for a total of 30 years. All the lease agreements signed at the time of independence in 1970 would thus be due for renewal this year.

There has been a demand from the Indo-Fijians for the extension of the lease initially to 30 years, renewable twice, thus a total of 90 years, to encourage large investments in agriculture. This has been misprojected by the anti-Indo-Fijian sections of the political class as a devious bid to deprive the natives of their land rights, thereby creating baseless fears in the minds of the natives.

In 1987, the activities of the newly-formed Taukei (Owners of the Land) movement, which projected the inclusion of Indo-Fijians in the cabinet of Dr. Timoci Bavadra, himself a Fijian native, as marking the beginning of the end of the land rights of the natives, triggered the train of events which led to the coup by Col. Sitiveni Rabuka, now the head of the Great Council of Chiefs.

Movements such as Taukei tend to be not only anti-Indo-Fijian, but also anti-Chiefs. They challenge the traditional political influence of the Chiefs. Whenever they become active, the military, on its own or on a nod from the Chiefs, tends to act against Indo-Fijian political leaders, lest the Chiefs be overtaken from the right by these movements and their own traditional authority weakened.

The Fijian economic contours have changed since 1970. Tourism has replaced sugar as the main foreign exchange earner, bringing prosperity to the western areas of the country, which attract more tourists than the east. A new class of native Fijian entrepreneurs is coming up in the services sector and in fields such as garments manufacture, gold mining and timber.

The Fijian natives have a greater share of the economic cake now than in the past. At the same time, those just above or below the poverty line have not benefitted from the new Fijian economy.

On the contrary, their problems have worsened due to a continuing high rate of inflation (10 to 15 per cent), and unemployment. Twenty-five per cent of the labour force of 264,000 is unemployed. The percentage is higher (40) in the case of those in the 18-25 age group.

Mr.Mahendra Chaudhry's Labour Party won an absolute majority (37 out of 71 seats) in the elections to the House of Representatives in May last year because of the support which he enjoyed not only from Indo-Fijian farmers and workers, but also from sections of native Fijian workers due to his long association with the trade union movement. Irrespective of ethnic and religious differences, the proletariat of all communities saw him as their man.

Despite the absolute majority of his party, his Cabinet was not homogenous because under the 1998 Constitution, every party, which wins at least 10 per cent of the seats, has a right to be represented in the Cabinet.

As a result, one saw the strange spectacle of Ministers belonging to different parties voicing serious allegations against one another as they felt that Mr.Chaudhry could not sack them so long as they enjoyed the confidence of their party.

Within one year, he managed to fritter away a large volume of the public support due to his failure to deal effectively with the economy and allegations of misuse of government funds for personal purposes by not only other Cabinet members, but by Mr.Chaudhry himself. The increase in POL prices introduced by him further added to the anger against him.

While thus suffering a diminution of the support of the farmers, the proletariat, the bazari class and government servants, who constitute the traditional vote bank of his party, he failed to remove the fears of the newly-emerging native Fijian entrepreneurial class that because of his trade union background, he would be anti-business.

It is not without reason that the first shots in the current drama in Fiji were fired by Mr.George Speight, an US-educated businessman of mixed parentage, whose business had suffered, in his perception, due to the wrong policies of Mr.Chaudhry and some of his (Mr.Speight's) associates, who had similarly suffered.

India has a strong interest in working for the political and other human rights of the Indo-Fijians and for the restoration of the duly-elected government, whatever be its sins of commission and omission. At the same time, any temptation for spectacular diplomatic action to isolate the Fijian military, with an eye on possible political benefits in India as a defender of the rights of the Indian diaspora, should be resisted due to the following reasons:

* Fiji is a very small country, with a very small population with very limited needs. Economic sanctions may not, therefore, be effective. As it happened with the post-1987 sanctions, the other Pacific islanders may express their solidarity with the Fijians, thereby further reducing their effectiveness.

* Not only the Fijian natives, but also the Indo-Fijians would suffer from the economic hardships.

* Instead of promoting ethnic fusion, which should be India's aim, any unwise action by New Delhi in leading the charge against the military regime might further aggravate the ethnic and religious divide, causing ethnic fission.

* Australia and New Zealand have traditionally been the economic benefactors of Fiji and Japan is replacing Australia as its main trading partner. The Fijian military has been the beneficiary of training and other assistance from the Australian and New Zealand armed forces. Suva would, most probably, be more amenable to their pressure and nudging than to India's. India should, therefore, discreetly act through these countries, instead of directly.

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