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Chapter Title: Into the Fray

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## Chapter 3: Into the Fray

Communal franchise is wrong in principle and harmful in practice. The time has come in Fiji for all races to get out of the thin water-tight compartments and start thinking in terms of residents of Fiji.

A.D. Patel, 1929

The question of equality has been raised and I should like to say publicly that, so far as Fijians are concerned, we think we are very well treated, and for the next two or three generations we look to European leadership and expect the Europeans to lead us until such times as we are able to guide ourselves.

Ratu Sukuna, 1933

European dominance in Fiji came under increasing challenge in the 1920s and the 1930s from the local Indian community demanding its appropriate place at the colonial table as well as from the Government of India. It was clear that Fiji could not, and would not be allowed to, continue to tread the path of gradualism of the previous half century of colonial rule. Indian leaders, A.D. Patel among them, were in the vanguard of the effort to give their people political representation and economic opportunity commensurate with their numbers and contribution to the economy. An equally important part of their political project was the social improvement of the Indian community, now gradually emerging from the shadow of indenture.

In 1936, the population of Fiji stood at 198,379, comprising 97,651 Fijians, 85,002 Indians, 4,028 Europeans, 4,574 Part-Europeans, and the rest made up of Pacific Islanders, Chinese and others. Of all the groups in Fiji, the Indian population had registered the largest absolute increase, by 24,368, from the previous census in 1921. Within the next decade, the Indians would become an outright majority in the population, spawning fears of Indian domination of the political and economic agenda of the colony. This development deeply affected the outlook and attitude of other groups in Fiji and influenced government policy.

Throughout this period, the Indo-Fijian community continued to live in rural areas and depended on the land for its livelihood, which created problems of its own. In 1936, for example, some 12,000 Indo-Fijians were working in sugar cane-related work as planters, cutters and general labourers, while others were cultivating such cash crops as cotton, tobacco and rice. Small but increasing numbers were also becoming residents in the sugar towns of Viti Levu, such as Ba, Lautoka, Nadi, Sigatoka, Navua and Vaileka. The descendants of the *girmitiyas*

were joined in the 1930s by small numbers of 'free migrants' from the Punjab and Gujarat. The Punjabis came from the migration-prone districts of Ludhiana and Jullundar and Hoshiarpur in the Doaba, which had long furnished migrants to other parts of the world, especially to the Pacific coast of North America.<sup>1</sup> The Fiji Punjabis, predominantly Sikhs, found a niche in commercial agriculture and dairy farming, where they prospered. Along with a well deserved reputation for industry and thrift, the Punjabis were also well known—notorious—for their independence and devotion to the cause of Indian nationalism. In the 1920s, several of them were members of the Ghadr movement, an organisation founded in San Francisco in the early years of this century to overthrow British rule in India by force. By 1930, there were some 2,000 Punjabis in Fiji.

Another stream of free migrants to Fiji came from Gujarat. Gujarati migration has particular significance for our story and deserves an extended treatment.<sup>2</sup> The first Gujarati migrants to Fiji were a couple of Parsi artisans who arrived in 1901, recruited in the Bombay Presidency by Thomas Hughes of the CSR. Little is known about their background. The next Gujaratis to arrive in Fiji were Chunilal Ganji and Virji Narshi (Sonar or goldsmiths). From Porbandar in Kathiawar, they came in 1904. Four years later, Narotam Karsandas and Motiram Narsey, both Khatri (traders), arrived in the colony from the Navsari division of the Baroda state. These two groups dominated the Gujarati population in Fiji in the early years, their numbers increasing through family-sponsored migration. In later years, other artisan castes, such as shoemakers (mochi), tailors (Darji), barbers (Nav), launderers (dhobi) and hawkers augmented Gujarati numbers in Fiji. Most of them came either from Navsari or from Surat in British Gujarat. Thus, between 1916 and 1920, of the 752 Gujaratis who applied for passports to migrate to Fiji, 336 were from Surat and 296 from Navsari. The rest were from Kathiawar.<sup>3</sup>

Patidari migration to Fiji began with the arrival of Appabhai Lalubhai Patel in 1914. He came from the socially prestigious Chaggam village of Dharmaj. Soon afterwards, he was joined by another Patidar, Chimanbhai Patel. Because of his high caste and social status and his considerable business acumen, Appabhai quickly established himself as an influential man of considerable power within the Gujarati community. In 1917, he formed a trading Company called A.J.C Patel and Company in partnership with Chimanbhai Patel and J.P. Maharaj, with branches in Lautoka, Nadi, Ba and Sigatoka. Appabhai was personally responsible for bringing some 21 Patidars into Fiji between 1920 and 1934. The Patidar traders settled in the sugar towns of Fiji in western Viti Levu (Ba, Lautoka,

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1 On the history of Sikh migration generally, Kessinger, 1974.

2 Much of this is based on the doctoral thesis of Kamal Kanta Prasad on the Gujaratis. I acknowledge my debt to Dr Prasad with the hope that he will make his fine study more widely available.

3 Prasad, 1978, 130.

Nadi and Sigatoka). Although the Patidar migrants began their life in Fiji under the guidance of Appabhai, and constituted a close-knit community, many of them subsequently broke away or moved on to start their own businesses in different parts of Fiji.

The high tide of Gujarati migration to Fiji was from the 1920s onwards, its population increasing from 324 in 1921 to 1,200 in 1930 to 2,500 in 1935. At first, the Gujaratis attracted little attention from the rest of the Indian population but this changed as their numbers increased and as they became the dominant and the most visible trading group in the Indian community. Of the 600 Indian business registrations between 1924 and 1945, Gujaratis held 300 trading licenses while North Indian Hindus held 192, Muslims 34, South Indians 19, Punjabis 24 and others nine.<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, their commercial success made them the target of other Indian groups. Several Fiji Indian leaders wanted free migration from India discontinued altogether. The Gujarati social and cultural exclusivity and aloofness from the broader Indian community compounded the problem caused by economic competition. A new source of friction was thus born in the Indian community: India-born versus Fiji-born, new immigrants versus the descendants of the original migrants, the *girmitiya*. A.D. Patel did not escape the consequences of this controversy.

This is not to say that all the descendants of the *girmitiya* were united or culturally homogenous. On the contrary, deep divisions racked the community, mostly along religious lines. There were the predictable Hindu-Muslim divisions, newly institutionalised in the 1920s. The Muslims declared themselves to be a separate community, a racial group, wholly different group from other Indians, and thus deserving separate electoral representation in the Legislative Council. Within the Muslim community, however, there were further divisions between the Shia and the Sunni, the theological dispute centring around the question of who was the rightful heir to the leadership of the Islamic faith after Prophet Mohammed's death: the caliphs or the immediate members of the Prophet's family. Was Mohammed the last Prophet of God or were there others to follow him? Among the Hindus, there were bitter conflicts between the orthodox ritual-observing Sanatanis and the self-confessedly more reform-minded Arya Samajis. The Arya Samajis, however, were the better-educated and more cohesive group, and correspondingly more assertive in the political arena. Their activism, in turn, aroused the suspicion of other groups which feared Arya Samaj dominance. Any aspiring leader had to negotiate his way through this minefield of religious and cultural factionalism in the Indian community with great tact and skill. A.D. Patel soon discovered how fraught that task was.

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4 Prasad, 1978, 263.

With the arrival of A.D. and S.B. Patel, the tenor of Indo-Fijian politics changed in a number of ways. The Patels were not satisfied with the status quo and they would not be silenced or out-manoeuvred with promises of piecemeal changes within the existing institutional arrangements; they questioned the fundamental moral and political values which underpinned the colonial order. Overhauling the system and not merely tinkering with it was their ultimate goal. To be effective, they needed political organisation as well as concrete plans for programmatic action. Several quasi-political bodies were formed or re-activated, including the Fiji Indian Congress and the Indian Association of Fiji, and regular Fiji-wide conferences were held to discuss major issues concerning the Indian community. The Patels were able to articulate the grievances of the Indian community much more effectively than their counterparts before them. Here, their command of the English language, their legal knowledge and their familiarity with western ways helped. They showed an independence of spirit and a tenacity of purpose lacking in the past; they could not be ignored. They were also effective in using their connections with organisations and individuals outside the colony in London, India and Kenya, to publicise their causes, much to the frustration and embarrassment of the local authorities, who had hitherto managed to keep the lid on the affairs of the colony.

A.D. Patel was propelled onto the public stage soon after arriving in the colony. In 1930, he was elected president of the Fiji Indian Congress in Lautoka, which merged, through the mediation of S.B. Patel, with another rival body of the same name formed in Suva by Hamilton Beattie, a Scottish medical doctor generally sympathetic to the needs and aspirations of the Indian community. The same year, he was elected president of the Indian Association of Fiji, an umbrella organisation of Indians, which convened meetings to discuss issues affecting the Indian community. He was also elected president of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, patron of the Gujarat Mandal and General Manager of the schools run by the Then India Sanmarga Ikya Sangam, the cultural organisation of the South Indians. In his various capacities, Patel frequently presided at meetings all over Viti Levu as well as Vanua Levu. As president of the Indian Association, he corresponded with leading figures outside the colony. Kodanda Rao visited Fiji in 1936 at the invitation of the Association, and Patel helped facilitate C.F. Andrews' visit to Fiji in the same year.

The first political campaign in which A.D. Patel participated, though not as its leading member, was the Indian demand for a non-racial common roll system of voting. Indians were given franchise and three seats in the Legislative Council in 1925, after pressure from the Government of India. Until then, as already seen, the Council had no Indian representation apart from one nominated member, while the Europeans enjoyed six seats and the Fijians five, the latter's representatives being chosen by the Great Council of Chiefs. The new Legislative

Council elections took place in 1929. A.D. Patel was approached to stand but was ineligible as he did not yet meet the two year residency requirement for candidates. S.B. Patel preferred to remain behind the scenes. The three candidates chosen by the Indian Association were Vishnu Deo for the Southern Constituency, Parmanand Singh for the Northwest, and Ram Chandar Maharaj for the East. All three were elected.

Once in the Council, the three representatives, but Vishnu Deo in particular, asked a lengthy list of questions that focussed attention on the disadvantaged position of the Indian community in education, commerce and the public sector, and the government's apparent indifference to its needs.<sup>5</sup> Then on 5 November 1929, Vishnu Deo moved that the 'political rights and status granted to Indian settlers in this Colony along racial lines are not acceptable to them;' and that 'Indians in Fiji should be granted Common Franchise along with other British subjects resident in the Colony.' He stated the reasons, which had been canvassed and carefully choreographed at meetings of Indians throughout the colony. He reminded the Council of the promises of equality which both the colonial as well as the imperial governments had made to the Indian community. The Salisbury Despatch was mentioned as well as the government's undertaking in 1920 that 'the position of Indian Immigrants in Fiji would be equal to that of all other subjects of His Majesty's resident in Fiji.' The granting of common franchise would not detract from promises in the Deed of Cession made to the Fijian people. 'The interests of the Fijians,' Vishnu Deo said, 'must be paramount, and they must be maintained.' The Indian community had no desire to question the rights and privileges enjoyed by the Fijian people. Nonetheless, 'the elective representation on this Council at present enjoyed [by Europeans] is presumably not regarded in any way inconsistent with the terms of the Deed of Cession and it can hardly be argued the grant of a common franchise would infringe those terms.'

Along and tense debate followed, but in the end the common roll motion was defeated whereupon the three elected Indian representatives walked out of the Legislative Council. When they refused to reconsider their boycott decision and missed three consecutive sittings of the Council, their seats became vacant. To break the impasse, the new governor, Sir Murchison Fletcher, convened a meeting of the leading Indian leaders at the Government House in December, 1929. The Indian delegation included A.D. and S.B. Patel, Vishnu Deo, Dr Deva Sagayam, John F. Grant, Abdul Karim, Ram Chandra Maharaj, and Parmanand Singh. At the conference, Fletcher, who had previously served in Ceylon and was thus familiar with the nature of communal politics on the Indian subcontinent,

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5 Fiji Legislative Council Debates, 1929 for a full discussion.

said that the communal roll was the best system for Fiji, in view of its divided social structure and disparate political interests. He then invited the group to respond. A.D. Patel replied:

Communal franchise is wrong in principle and harmful in practice; the time has come in Fiji for all races to get out of the thin water-tight compartments and start thinking in terms of the residents of Fiji. The last election has clearly shown the mutual antagonisms of different races in this Colony. Acceptance of the present franchise would accentuate those differences instead of alleviating them. Unless and until the present constitution is changed, we cannot see our way to cooperate with the government through this Council. The question of a common franchise is an imperial question which would have to be solved presently by the Imperial Parliament. Meanwhile, we are quite prepared to cooperate with the Government if and when they require our cooperation but not through the acceptance of the present franchise.<sup>6</sup>

S.B. Patel agreed, saying that 'equal political status is the essential condition for co-operation with the Government. Under a communal franchise, we are granted second class citizenship.' Others present at the meeting expressed similar sentiments, though later John F. Grant changed his stance and told Dr McGusty, the Acting Secretary of Indian Affairs, that he had been 'shamed' by the Indian community into acquiescing. Parmanand Singh also backed off. Some prominent leaders such as Rev Deoki, Abdul Aziz Khan, Ratu Ram Samujh, Rahiman, Ilahi Ramjan, David Dudley, Gurdayal, Durga Prasad, X.K. Nasir Dean, Spuran Singh and Nabi Buksh supported the more 'moderate' group. Wrote A.R. Sahu Khan, the district clerk from Ra: 'To the minority Indian (which includes Indian Christians and Muslims who on occasions joined hands) communities, common roll is tantamount to transferring political power from European to Hindu hands, and experience in India bids them to trust the former more than the latter. Hence they feel opposed to a common roll.'<sup>7</sup>

But that was a minority view in the Fiji Indian community. The response from overseas supported the common roll campaign. The East African Indian National Congress in Nairobi passed a resolution in December 1929 fully sympathising 'with the Indians in Fiji in their fight for equality of status with Europeans in that colony and supports their movement on the direction of non-participation in the legislature till their goal is reached.' Mahatma Gandhi, who had been cabled about the issue, wrote:

I congratulate the three members on their patriotic spirit in having resigned from the Council by way of protest. I hope that they will on no

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6 *Fiji Samachar*, December 1929.

7 Colonial Secretary Office File 51/102/13.

account reconsider their decision unless a common franchise is obtained. Having resigned, however, they must not sit idle but continue their agitation for the simple justice to which they are entitled. If the Indian colonist in Fiji is well organised, the citadel of anti-Indian prejudice is bound to breakdown through united effort.<sup>8</sup>

Good advice, but the reality on the ground was different. The most important problem facing the Indian community was lack of unity. Many Indian leaders, either out of self-interest or because of genuine conviction, thought that co-operating with the government would produce better results. Muslim leaders, who wanted separate representation, thought the common roll campaign to be detrimental to the interests of their community. They feared being submerged by the Hindu majority, and they, like the others, were not immune to the current of communal politics on the Indian subcontinent. The Europeans were almost viscerally opposed to the extension of any political privileges to the Indians. As Henry Marks told the visiting Secretary of State L.S. Amery in December 1927, if government policy was to encourage the development of social and political consciousness among the Indians, 'we are starting one hundred years too soon.'<sup>9</sup> 'We have the Indians here,' he said in 1929, 'and we must make the best of it and teach them: 'We' are the Colony and not the Indians.'<sup>10</sup>

Marks and other like-minded Europeans were supported by Fijian leaders who saw, and were encouraged to see, a common cause with Europeans. In 1933, the Great Council of Chiefs passed a resolution, recording its 'strong and unanimous opinion that Fiji, having been ceded to Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, Her Heirs and Successors, the immigrant Indian population should neither directly nor indirectly have any part in the control or direction of matters affecting the interests of the Fijian race.'<sup>11</sup> The resolution actually meant the affairs of the colony of Fiji. The resolution was noted and duly sent to the Colonial Office in London.

Fletcher was determined to stop the common roll campaign, which Patel and Vishnu Deo were continuing throughout Viti Levu, not altogether successfully because when the by-elections for the Indian seats were held in 1932, two of the seats were contested, the Southern seat by K.B. Singh and the Western seat by Munsami Mudaliar. Fletcher also set out to marginalise the mainstream of the Fiji Indian leadership. Like many Europeans at the time, he thought that most Indian people were content with their condition, ignorant of the world and uninterested in politics; that they were being manipulated by unscrupulous leaders for their own gain. He conceived several strategies to effect his plan.

8 *Young India*, 21 November 1929.

9 Colonial Office Series 83/103.

10 *Fiji Times*, 6 June 1929.

11 Colonial Office Series 83/210.

With his previous assignment in Ceylon, he tried to play the religious card by recommending a separate seat for Muslims. The interesting thing, as Patel told Robert Norton in 1966, was that the proposal was initiated by Fletcher himself, and not by the Muslim leaders.<sup>12</sup> Fletcher floated an idea which later Muslim leaders would embrace as their own. The Colonial Office rejected the proposal on the grounds that it would exacerbate tension between Hindus and Muslims. The Muslims constituted a small percentage of the Indian population, and there were only three seats for the Indian community in the Legislative Council. Moreover, the Government of India supported common and not communal roll. When the Muslim strategy failed, Fletcher proposed the introduction of more Chinese into the colony 'as a useful counter-balance to the Indians.' But Australia and New Zealand did not want 'yellow labour so near [their door]' and the Colonial Office would not sanction the introduction of yet another ethnic group into an already complex situation.<sup>13</sup>

When all these strategies failed, Fletcher settled on changing the electoral system. He proposed the abolition of the elective system altogether and its replacement with nomination. That, he felt, would increase government control over political development, stall the drive for common roll and reduce the influence of the Indian politicians whom Fletcher condemned as the 'uninformed tool of an extraneous organisation which is dangerously seeking opportunity to use the Colony for the purposes of world-wide attack upon the British raj.'<sup>14</sup> Fletcher then set about orchestrating the passage of the motion in the Legislative Council. On 17 May, 1935, K.B. Singh, the member for the Indian Southern Division, moved:

That in the opinion of this council it would be in the best interests of the Colony and the various races resident therein if the European and Indian Members as well as the Fijian Members were nominated and not elected, an equal number of seats to be reserved for each of the communities.<sup>15</sup>

The motion was passed by five votes to three. The government asked the Colonial Office in a secret despatch on 27 May to accept the motion, and to amend the Letters Patent accordingly. Nomination, it said, would ensure the representation in the Council of all sections of the Indian community, and not only of the more vocal sections of the Arya Samajis; it would also curtail the threat to European dominance; and, an important consideration, the Fijians supported the move.

Europeans supported the proposal, though they regretted reversion to nomination. Publicly they supported the move because it would neutralise the

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12 A tape of the conversation is in my possession.

13 Lal, 1992, 63.

14 Lal, 1992, 93-94.

15 Colonial Office Series, 83/210.

demand for common roll. Privately, they supported it because it would keep the Europeans on top of the steadily increasing Part-European population. Without nomination, the Europeans feared being swamped. As Sir Philip Goldfinch, the General Manager of the CSR said, he was opposed to the introduction of the nomination system 'but the half-caste argument had persuaded him.'<sup>16</sup> Fijian chiefs naturally supported the government. So, too, did some Indians. Some orthodox Hindus, resentful of Arya Samaj dominance of the Indian political agenda, agreed with the Governor, as also did some Muslims. One of them thought the whole idea of democracy ridiculous. In a petition to the Governor on 4 March 1935, Fiji Muslim League president Diljan and Secretary Hasan Raza said they supported the nomination system in the hope that Muslims might be nominated to the Legislative Council. A petition signed by ten Muslims said:

Members chosen on the elective principle possess a positive vice for that they always dance to the music of the ring leader amongst their constituents, and often aim at gaining cheap applause and thus sustaining their popularity amongst the masses, even if it is at the expense of their own community's welfare. De facto, the elective principle, as compared with the nominative principle, simply transfers the power of selection from the head of the Administration to the garrulous 'soap-box' orator.'<sup>17</sup>

In a direct reference to people like A.D. and S.B. Patel, the petition said: 'We have seen enough of men who are mere 'birds of passage' and who have come here simply to reap a fortune. They are undoubtedly shrewd and full of tactics for their personal and selfish ends; but we repose no trust in them where our welfare and the interests of the colony are concerned.' They hoped that when the nomination system was introduced, that the interests of the Muslim community would be kept in mind.

The division of opinion in the Indian community was one reason why K.B. Singh moved the motion. But he had other personal motives as well. Singh was a government man, and assured by the Governor of being nominated to the Legislative Council after the expiry of his first term. Assured of official patronage, Singh urged the Governor in January 1934 to create an intelligence branch for Indians 'without delay' to maintain surveillance of Indian politicians; to require the presence of government officers at all meetings of Indians; to take action against Indian 'ring leaders' who should be required to submit in advance programs of their meetings for government scrutiny. 'I respectfully

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16 Colonial Office Series, 83/206.

17 Colonial Office Series, 83/210.

submit that if Your Excellency takes me in your confidence, I hope that I will be able to perform my duties more satisfactorily and make Your Excellency's policy completely successful.'<sup>18</sup>

The majority of the Indian community, however, was opposed to the nomination system, and sent petitions to the Governor and to the Secretary of State in London. A.D. Patel and Vishnu Deo, president and secretary respectively of the Indian Association of Fiji, led the anti-nomination campaign. Early in June, the Association telegraphed H.S.L. Polak of the Indians Overseas Association:

Great majority of Europeans and Indians strongly oppose motion adopted by Fiji Legislature advocating immediate change from elective to nominated representation without mandate from community. Two discredited Indian members and three Europeans for and three Europeans against motion. Telegraphed to colonial Office by Acting Governor with request for instruction to extend life of Council expiring next month. Fijians neutral. Indian community beseech you take effective steps immediately to retain franchise.<sup>19</sup>

In a petition to the Governor in March and a memorandum in May, 1935, Patel and Vishnu Deo argued against nomination.<sup>20</sup> They said that K.B. Singh and Munsami Mudaliar did not represent the interests of the Indian community and therefore had no mandate to support the motion. Their only reason was political survival: they knew that they would not be returned at the next election, and so the 'introduction of a system of nomination is their only hope of ensuring their seats in the Council.' The nominated members, moreover, would be mouthpieces of the government and not genuine representatives of the people. 'Our experience and knowledge of the type of Indians nominated by the Government to fill the positions in different local bodies, and in the Legislative Council of this Colony in the past, gives us strong reasons to believe that the people nominated by the Government will be on the whole people who will be acquiescent to the Legislative and Executive measures irrespective of whether they will be in the interest or against the interest of the community.'

For Patel and Vishnu Deo, 'the right of having a voice in the Legislative and Executive affairs of the State is the most valued and highly cherished right of every citizen irrespective of whatever creed or race he belongs, and we may be well pardoned if we are not prepared to relinquish it in favour of a system of nomination which means a complete denial of that most valuable right.' The 'suggested reversion to the nominated system of representation is not in the

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18 Singh wrote to the Governor on 9 January 1934 in Colonial Office Series, 83/206.

19 The petition was sent on 12 June 1935 and is in Colonial Office Series 83/210.

20 The petition was signed by hundreds of people from all the Divisions of Fiji; a copy of it and the memorandum is in my possession.

best interest of the Colony and the various races resident therein [which] would be a direct negation of British democratic ideals.' It would be a backward step as well, 'like filling new wine in old bottles.' It would be opposed by the Indian community. Why the haste, Patel asked? Why not hold a referendum on the issue to test public opinion? 'Six months or a year is but a moment in the history of any country. There is no urgency to effect any change in haste. 'Haste is waste' may be a common saying but it contains nuggets of wisdom which are not unworthy of being carefully considered.'

In the interview with the Governor at which the memorandum was presented, several issues were raised. The following exchange took place between the Governor and Patel:

Governor: Is it the desire of those who have signed the memorandum that there should be a common electoral roll?

Patel: The common roll principle is adhered to but the suggestion is that the wish of the people be ascertained from their representatives after the next general election.

Governor: Is it desired by the deputation that the common roll principle should be applied at once?

Patel: If a common roll is not attainable at present time the matter would not be pressed.

Governor: On the assumption that the common roll principle at present is unattainable, would you regard the present distribution of seats equitable?

Patel: No.

Governor: How far do you subscribe to my contention that the principle of equality between the three races would be attained by an equal distribution of seats between the three races?

Patel: While the common roll is unattainable, we would regard this as satisfactory.

Governor: In view of the opposition to the elective principle of the Fijians and of Indian minorities, do you regard the elective or the nominative system as the better suited to the conditions of the Colony?

Patel: It is admitted that the Indian community is not homogenous, but we ask that the elective principle should be retained.

Governor: At an election what likelihood is there of a Muslim candidate being returned?

Patel: A Muslim candidate would have an equal chance with a candidate derived from any other Indian section or community.<sup>21</sup>

Despite this and other representations, Fletcher remained unmoved, and pressed the Colonial Office to adopt nomination. But the Colonial Office balked, not only because it thought that a retrograde step when its ultimate goal was to encourage the emergence of representative government in the colonies, but also because the Government of India was opposed. On 30 September 1935, Ram Chandra, officiating secretary to the Government of India, wrote to the Secretary of State for India in London that the Standing Committee on Emigration of both the Houses of the Central Legislature had 'urged that the proposal to substitute nomination for election is a retrograde step' and should not be adopted. Faced with conflicting pressures, the Colonial Office devised a compromise, combining nomination with election. It proposed to increase the Legislative Council to 31, made up of 15 unofficial members and 16 official members. Each of the three ethnic groups would be allocated five seats. All the Fijian seats would be nominated by the Great Council of Chiefs, but three each of the Indian and European seats would be elected on communal franchise and the remaining two filled through nomination. The Fiji government agreed, and the system, introduced in 1937, remained unchanged till 1963.

Along with political representation, land was an issue which featured prominently at nearly every conference of Fiji Indian leaders throughout the 1930s. It was the major item on the agenda of the all-Fiji Indian conference organised by A.D. Patel in October 1929. That meeting urged the government to 'consider the advisability of granting long term leases to Indians and submits that the renewal and extension of leases should not entail any hardship to tenants.'<sup>22</sup> At the same time, petitions were sent to sympathetic organisations in India and London to increase pressure on the colonial government to act expeditiously in the matter. At another major conference Patel organised at the Lilac Theatre in Suva in October 1938, which was presided by Pandit Hriday Nath Kunzru, the eminent Indian statesman, land was the major issue. Resolutions called for a commission of enquiry, comprising representatives of the Fiji Indian community, the Government of India and the colonial government, to investigate the economic condition of the Indians, and to recommend expeditious renewal of leases, opening up of new land, and greater security of tenure. The colonial government was reminded of 'the urgent need for legislation to regulate the relations of landlords and tenants and to allow to tenants the rights and protection enjoyed by them in all civilised countries. The present position is giving rise to widespread and acute discontent and unless dealt with fairly and boldly

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21 In Colonial Office Series, 83/210.

22 *Fiji Samachar*, November 1929.

will prove seriously detrimental to the future development of the colony.<sup>23</sup> The conference also asked the Government of India to ‘take early action to prevent tenants from being forced to work for any individual or association.’ Other resolutions called for the training of more Indian medical students, extension of medical facilities to rural areas, the establishment of Indian child welfare centres and training of Indian nurses,<sup>24</sup> and the provision of running water to districts where this was not available.

It is not necessary here to dwell at length on the cumbersome procedures that governed the leasing of land in Fiji before and up to the 1930s. It is enough to note that it was chaotic and often led to corruption. The potential lessor, in the first instance, had to apply to the Commissioner of Lands in Suva or to the Commissioner in whose district the land was located. The Commissioner then notified the local Buli (local administrator), who in turn brought the application before a meeting of the District Council, at which the Fijian landowners expressed their views about the proposed lease. The Buli conveyed the decision of the Council to the Commissioner who then made a recommendation to the government. There, the application and the recommendations were considered by the Commissioner of Lands and the Secretary of Native Affairs. If they approved, the lease was then sold at a public auction to the highest bidder. This procedure was simplified in the mid-1920s, but many of its irrational features remained. The concerned *mataqali* head might still want a ‘little something’ to agree to the lease, and he might also play one potential tenant against another. Sometimes, even bribery did not work, for there was no guarantee, after the chief had approved, that the District Council or the government would approve the lease. Of course, the tenants wanted the best land, which meant that undesirable parcels remained unused. This problem attracted attention in the 1930s because Indians were moving steadily into agriculture. The CSR was also keen to stabilise land leasing procedures to ensure the expansion of sugar cane cultivation. As Sir Philip Goldfinch put it, ‘any sign of the ‘dog in the manger’ attitude on the part of the landowners must be obliterated with a firm policy of the Crown.’ If Fijians did not themselves cultivate the land, they must lease it to those who would.<sup>25</sup> And there was pressure from outside, principally from the Government of India, which reminded Fiji in 1935 that the colony’s well-being ‘must largely depend upon a satisfactory adjustment of [Indians’] rights and opportunities in relation to agricultural land.’<sup>26</sup>

Fijian leaders were aware of these pressures. They accepted that improved leasing arrangements would benefit them as well. The colonial government, too,

23 *Fiji Times*, 3 November 1938.

24 There was already in existence a Child Welfare Program for the Fijian people.

25 CSO conf. 37/4/26 CSO F37/98.

26 CSO F37 /98.

realised that it could no longer procrastinate, with the Governor telling the Great Council of Chiefs in 1936 that he would take a greater role in the 'stewardship of native land.' Ratu Sukuna told the Great Council of Chiefs in 1936:

We cannot in these days adopt an attitude that will conflict with the welfare of those who like ourselves wish to live peacefully and increase the wealth of the Colony. We are doing our part here and so are they. We want to live; they do the same. You should realise that money causes a close inter-relation of interests. If other communities are poor, we too remain poor. If they prosper, we also prosper. But if we obstruct other people without reason from using our lands, following the laggards there will be no prosperity. Strife will overtake us, and before we realise the position, we shall be faced with a situation beyond our control, and certainly not to our liking...You must remember that Fiji today is not what it used to be. We are not the sole inhabitants; there are now Indians and Europeans.<sup>27</sup>

This conciliatory attitude, born of pressure and necessity, resulted in the drafting of the new Native Lands Ordinance in 1937 and its promulgation three years later. The responsibility for the leasing of all native land was placed in the hands of a new statutory body, the Native Lands Trust Board, providing for the reservation of sufficient land to meet the future needs of the Fijian people. With that, the land question was settled for more than a generation.

Elections for the Legislative Council under the new Letters Patent were held in August 1937. As expected, the Governor nominated K.B. Singh to the Council. The second nominated member was Said Hasan, a Punjabi Muslim lawyer who had recently arrived in Fiji. For the three remaining elected seats, there were strict qualifications both for voters as well as candidates, including a two year residency requirement, a knowledge of English, and a net income either of £120 from business or professional occupations or £150 from land. Indian voters had to be over 21 years, with 12 month residency in the constituency, literate in either English, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telegu or Gurmukhi, owning freehold or leased land of an annual value of £50 or more or a net cash income of £70. Needless to say, these provisions effectively excluded the majority of the Indians from voting because land was held in the name of one person, usually the father, and few had separate disposable income.

Vishnu Deo was elected from the Southern division and Tularam from the North. The Indian candidate for the North-western Viti Levu constituency was A.D. Patel, who had by this time emerged on the scene as a forceful and eloquent speaker and advocate for the rights of the Indian community in Fiji.

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27 Speech in CO 83/215.

Nonetheless, he was defeated by Chandrasenan Chatur Singh, who polled 671 votes to Patel's 651, 66 votes being invalid. Chatur Singh was a law clerk in the firm of D.C. Chalmers in Nadi, and not Patel's own law clerk as is widely believed. Patel's defeat caused great surprise. Patel was the 'official' candidate of the Arya Samaj, while Singh claimed to be its 'unofficial' candidate, although I have been told that the Arya Samaj neither officially nor unofficially endorsed anyone for Legislative Council elections, not even Vishnu Deo (Patel's nomination paper was signed by two Arya Samajis, Randhir Singh and R. Prasad, while Singh's were signed by four Samaj leaders Hardayal Sharma, Ori, Motichand and Shiu Prasad). Why did Patel lose the election?

There were several reasons. Patel's opponent, Chatur Singh, was a well-connected Ba resident. Partly educated in New Zealand, he had travelled in the United States, Europe and India, and for a while was doing business in Madras. His elder brother, Parmanand Singh, was one of the three Indian elected members who had walked out of the Legislative Council in 1929. He was also the president of the Ba branch of the Indian Association (Patel was its national president). Singh, then, was the local boy who had made good. This worked in his favour, for the Fiji-born, India-born issue was raised in the election. One of Patel's remarks was twisted and used against him. In attempting to highlight the plight of the Indians, and the inhumanity of both the colonial government and the Colonial Sugar Refining Company, Patel recalled how in the indenture days, some Indian women had to give birth in cane fields. His opponents publicised this as the remark of an arrogant India-born Gujarati who had insulted the local Fiji-born by suggesting that they were born in the cane fields!

Patel's Gujarati background did not help matters either although it is important to note that some influential Gujarati merchants publicly opposed Patel and supported his opponents. As already seen, the numbers of Gujarati arriving in Fiji had increased markedly in the 1930s. The new migrants moved into petty trading, hawking, shop keeping, and into tailoring, laundering, and jewellery making. Their industry and long hours of work earned them the wrath of their competitors. In post-Depression Fiji, the Gujaratis became visible symbols of an oppressive class. European businessmen, threatened by this challenge, albeit still a small one, to their dominant position in the economy, railed against these 'birds of passage' exploiting the country for their own ends. Some of their rhetoric was also echoed by non-Gujarati Indian traders and others who felt overwhelmed by the industry and enterprise of the new immigrants. As descendants of *girmitiyas*, the original migrants, they resented being overtaken.

Siding with European traders, they formed a Young India Society in 1937 advocating the total prohibition of immigration, and demanding more government inspection of the Gujarati trading practices and working habits. P. Anand Singh of Ba wrote to the government on 23 January 1937: 'There are

certain undesirable types of immigrants; Fiji is full of such. These men refuse to admit in their social circle which in itself creates bad feeling; these traders refuse to employ local borns in service; they refuse to teach them any form of trade; they refuse to spend in Fiji; their god is money, and their interest in Fiji purely a matter of pounds, shillings and pence. Our troubles date from far back, and it dates back from the days when professional men arrived amongst us.' The petition was signed by two hundred North Indians. Expressing the same feeling, a North Indian law clerk wrote in 1935: 'The Indian Tailors, Barbers, Boot makers and Dhobis start work at daybreak and continue their labour until late hours at night. They take no rest; if they are not working with their front doors open, they are continuing their labours inside the stores. 'his unfair competition is not in the interests of the local Indians or Traders and the sooner these people are made to take proper rest, the better for the whole community.'<sup>28</sup> Hard work was being equated with unfair competition. The call to legally enforce 'proper rest' was a novel, strange idea. Such ideas would be amusing were they not presented with great seriousness, providing telling insights into the post-*girmit* Indian mentality.

There were, however, some legitimate complaints against the Gujarati traders and others like them. Often they charged exorbitant interest on money lending, sometimes as much as 37-40 per cent without compunction. The traders would take from the cash-strapped farmers' promissory notes up to an estimated value of goods they required between cane harvests. As soon as cane harvesting began, they would take action to secure the proceeds of the crop in repayment. The traders' words carried the day, for the farmers were often illiterate and kept poor records, if any at all, of their transactions. On top of recovering their loans, the storekeepers also demanded (and obtained) interest on those loans, which the promissory notes did not allow (*BiyajNahin*) And so they entered the vicious cycle of debt, legal costs and compound interests. Sometimes, however, the farmers themselves were to blame. As the District Officer of Nadroga noted in 1942: 'The farmers are often to blame for not keeping their promises to pay when cane harvest payments were made and now, of course, the storekeeper is having to get every penny he can settle with the bigger stores for the goods he has obtained for them.'<sup>29</sup> The suggestion was that the Gujarati storekeeper himself was a cog in a larger wheel which most farmers did not realise.

Resentment against the Gujaratis' thrift and industry led to the demand for a strict control of all 'free' immigration into the colony. Patel opposed that demand, which was directed principally at Gujarati and Punjabi immigrants. The proposed restriction on immigration 'was an unnecessary encroachment on the right of domicile of the Indians in the Colony,' he told a meeting at

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28 CSO 51/102/18.

29 CSO 51/102/20.

Lautoka on 19 December 1937.<sup>30</sup> Why should these people be singled out for discriminatory treatment when there was no similar demand for the curtailment of European immigration?, he asked. What is good for the goose should be good for the gander. The Gujaratis and others were repatriating money to their families back in India, but that was a minuscule amount compared to what the big European firms, such as the CSR, were repatriating to their respective home countries. How would the Indians be better served by the Europeans running the economy? If the Gujaratis were birds of passage, so, too, he said, were the Governor and the European civil servants. 'It is stupid to raise the question of imported and local Indians,' Patel told a political meeting at the Crown Theatre in Lautoka in June 1937. The real criterion for election should be ability, not one's cultural background or how long one had been in Fiji. A month later, he told a meeting in Namoli that he did not want to go to the Legislative Council as a representative of the Gujaratis, but as a representative of the whole Indian community.<sup>31</sup> S.B. Patel made the same point, adding that A.D. was the best candidate for the job. Chatur Singh himself agreed. Patel was a good man but his 'extremist' stand on issues could lead to his deportation, just as Manilal had been deported in 1920. Fiji needed people like Patel, but not in politics! The best thing, Chatur Singh argued, would be to send him to the Legislative Council and keep Patel in the broader non-political arena, thus killing two birds at once.

Ironically, not all Gujaratis supported A.D. Patel. The most influential of them all, Appabhai Patel, the acknowledged leader of the Fiji Gujaratis, opposed Patel, and, according to some sources, urged Indians to vote for Patel's opponent, Chatur Singh. The exact reasons for Appabhai's attitude are not clear, though oral evidence points to two factors. A.D. Patel was not duly deferential to Appabhai's status and influence and did not seek his patronage to establish himself in Fiji, which, it is said, affronted the elder Patidar. Appabhai was also probably unhappy with A.D.'s personal lifestyle. His marriage to Patricia Seymour, and reports of A.D.'s marital infidelity, offended Appabhai's sense of the proper order of things. A.D., in Appabhai's view, was not behaving as a well educated Patidar should. Patel had also earned the wrath of the Muslims who were told by Said Hasan to vote for Chatur Singh. The main cause of the rift was Patel's strong public stand against nomination. Some prominent Muslims, as we have already seen, were opposed to the elective principle. Chatur Singh, too, was opposed to nomination, and had petitioned the government to that effect. But Patel was seen in a different light, articulate, forceful and uncompromising. In this assessment, they were right.

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30 See also *Fiji Times* 3 Nov. 1938.

31 CSO 51/54/1.

By 1937, Patel had firmly established himself in Nadi. His residence there influenced the future course of his public career. Nadi lay in the heartland of the sugar cane belt of Western Viti Levu. Nadi, Patel said, was the 'sugar bowl' of Fiji. It drew Patel into the farmers' struggle against the CSR, as we shall see in the next chapter. Here, we consider another distinguishing feature of Nadi which moulded Patel's work. Nadi was the cultural centre of the South Indian community, which provided the initial political base for A.D. Patel. For more than two decades, Patel acted as the Legal Advisor of the Sangam, the umbrella cultural organisation of the South Indians, managed its schools and represented the community's concern to the government. Patel's involvement in Sangam's affairs aroused suspicion among many about his 'real' motives: was this simply another ploy by a cunning lawyer to use the South Indians to advance his political career? Certainly the government thought so. The Secretary of Indian Affairs wrote in 1937: 'It appears that Mr A.D. Patel has political aspirations and is endeavouring to popularise himself among the South Indian people.'<sup>32</sup> This is a predictable indictment, for any Indian leader who challenged the colonial order was dismissed as 'ambitious,' 'extremist,' or 'disloyal.' There was more to the story though than simply naked ambition; in truth, it was a confluence of circumstances that drew Patel to the South Indian community.

The South Indians were the most disadvantaged cultural group in the Indian community. Darker skinned people of Dravidian stock, they bore the full brunt of North Indian cultural prejudices. Some Indian committee schools in Western Viti Levu refused to admit South Indian children. Socially isolated and economically down, they counted for little in the social and political agenda of Fiji Indian leadership, which was embroiled in deep religious and cultural disputes. The intra-communal, Hindu-Muslim, Sanatani-Arya Samaji disputes had contributed to Patel's defeat, and there was no sign of these destructive tensions dissipating anytime soon. Their absence among the South Indians attracted Patel to that group. Sangam, which means confluence, was a broad-based, inclusive organisation. Its flag carried the Christian cross, the Muslim star and crescent and the Hindu word 'Om.' Its schools were open to children of all groups and denominations.

The founder of the Sangam was Sadhu Kuppuswamy, a man of high moral and spiritual discipline imbued with the spirit of sacrifice.<sup>33</sup> Born in 1890 into the Balija caste in the village of Konoor in South Arcot (Tamil Nadu), Kuppuswamy came to Fiji as an indentured labourer in 1912. After serving his indenture at Yalandro in Tavua, he settled in Raki Raki. It did not take Kuppuswamy long to realise the enormous social, cultural and moral problems facing the South

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32 CSOF28/209.

33 Others who played the leading role in founding Sangam, according to A.D. Patel, were M.N. Naidu, Arunachalam Pillay, K.S. Raman and Jambulingam Pillay.

Indians in Fiji. He was particularly concerned at the neglect in the teaching and learning of South Indian languages, Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam. Without language and culture, people were as good as dead, he believed. The few European missionaries who worked among the Indians compounded the problem. Kuppuswamy wrote in his diary: 'These students who emerged from Mission schools were brainwashed to condemn Hinduism with the argument that the Hindus had innumerable gods and worshipped stones. Obviously these children did not know the depth of Hindu religion.' He believed that 'colonial rule will continue to be perpetuated endlessly in the absence of consciousness of freedom and self-dignity. Mother tongue, culture and traditions will die unless protected.' Patel agreed completely. As he said on 12 November 1947:

Peoples' sentiments and feelings will have to be respected and I might sound a note of warning that if I had choose between the extermination of my culture and traditions and self-extermination, I would choose the latter. Without my culture and tradition, I am nothing. I am not a human being, I am merely a beast; and that is not the sort of education we are willing to receive at the hands of the Education Department.<sup>34</sup>

To protect and promote South Indian culture, the Sangam built temples throughout Viti Levu, organised pujas and festivals and held night classes for adults. Even newspapers in Tamil and Telugu were printed. In 1930, the first Sangam primary school opened its doors, and Sadhu Kuppuswamy invited Patel to become its general manager. Patel also found his own philosophy compatible to the Sadhu's, which strengthened the bond between the two men. Kuppuswamy worshipped Ramana Maharishi, Ram and Krishna and Sarada Devi, but was a very keen devotee of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), whom A.L. Basham has described as 'a splendid speaker of great spiritual power and personal magnetism.'<sup>35</sup> Vivekananda was one of Patel's two idols, the other being Mahatma Gandhi. Vivekananda's message, which echoed the philosophy of his spiritual master, Sri Ramakrishna, was that 'each man was potentially divine, and so should both work to unleash the infinite power within himself, and should help other men to do the same.'<sup>36</sup> 'If you cannot see God in the human face, how can you see Him in the clouds,' asked Vivekananda, 'or in images made of dull, dead matter, or in mere fictions stored of your brain? I shall call you religious from the day you begin to see God in men and women and then you will understand what is meant by turning the left cheek to the man who

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34 Legislative Council Debate.

35 Basham, 1959, 483.

36 Theodore de Bary, 1964, 647.

strikes you on the right.'<sup>37</sup> Both Patel and Kuppuswamy shared the view that the noblest life was that which was devoted to social service, and that social service itself was a religious duty.

They also shared Vivekananda's great pride in the heritage of Indian civilisation. The Sadhu and the Sangam had the vision, but lacked the resources to realise them. Foremost among the problems they faced was the paucity of vernacular material in the three principal South Indian languages and suitably qualified teachers to teach them in the primary schools. In mid-1936, M.N. Naidu, the Sangam president, wrote to the Ramakrishna Mission in Calcutta seeking its assistance. In response, the Mission sent one of its senior monks, Swami Avinasananda, on a fact-finding mission to Fiji. He arrived in the colony in May 1937. The Swami was a striking figure and a dominating personality: tall, bearded, friendly, English-speaking former principal of the Surat National College, who had given up his academic career to join the Mission.

Patel and the Swami took to each other immediately. Patel recalled: 'He was a dreamer, an idealist, a visionary, and yet he was a determined worker who took delight in becoming a pioneer and breaking new ground.'<sup>38</sup> The Swami travelled around the country and impressed upon the people 'the need for welding the Sangam into a well-united centralised organisation running under the care and guidance of the Ramakrishna Mission.' Some people wanted to merge the two organisations but, according to Patel, the Swami 'thought that the time was not ripe and the people were not ready to justify the Mission in opening a branch in Fiji.' Instead, the Swami suggested, and it was agreed, that the Sangam become an affiliated body of the Mission. The day this decision was reached, the Swami went to Patel's house at two o'clock in the morning to tell him the news and to ask him to become the general manager of the Sangam. 'Couldn't you have come in the day time, instead of taking the trouble of coming at this hour of the night when the graves give up their dead and ghosts walk about?' Patel asked jestingly. The Swami retorted, 'I don't believe in leaving anything till tomorrow which I can do today, Ambalal.'

Avinasananda returned to India in February 1938, but he continued to keep a watchful eye on Fiji. When the government procrastinated, he wrote to Patel in October 1938: 'I would request you to seek an interview with the Governor and ask him squarely whether he means to stand by the public and solemn pledges and promises made by his predecessor, or is he going to allow the narrow-minded, spiteful officials to obstruct and nullify the concessions made to us.' The man of the cloth did not mince words. Patel admired the Swami's feisty fighting spirit. The Swami's visit and his persistence paid dividends

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37 de Bary, 1964, 648.

38 See also *Pacific Review*, 10 January 1957.

for the Sangam. After initial hesitation, the government accepted the Swami's suggestion that the Sangam be formally registered and given legal status. This was partly because the officials were impressed with Avinasananda, whom they called 'an outstanding figure among Indian religious workers,' 'undertaking very desirable religious and social work among the Indians,' and the Sangam 'a most worthy and progressive Indian Association.'<sup>39</sup> Strike while the iron is hot, Avinasananda told Patel, who immediately drew up the papers to have the Sangam registered as a limited liability company without the addition of the word limited. The Sangam was thus registered on 31 October 1937. Patel also persuaded the government to exempt it from the ordinance's clause limiting land ownership for such companies to two acres, and permitting it to own up to one thousand acres. In a letter he wrote to the Secretary of Indian Affairs on 28 November 1938, Patel made further requests: getting the Sangam representation on the Board of Education, importing teachers from India, introducing vernacular languages as an option to Hindi in teachers' examinations, providing for the teaching of vernacular Indian languages at the Natabua Teachers Training School, and seeking building grants and other facilities.<sup>40</sup>

Governor Sir Arthur Richards was sympathetic to the cultural and educational needs of the South Indian community. He told the Legislative Council in 1937:

For many years the Sangam has shown a keen interest in education and it has established its schools at considerable financial sacrifice in different parts of the Colony. The Sangam has frequently approached Government in the past with a request for facilities for the teaching of South Indian children in the mother tongue but, owing to the difficulty of finding suitable teachers for other Indian languages, the Government has been obliged to declare Hindi the medium of instruction in Indian vernacular schools. It is now intended that, in selected areas where Indian communities, whose mother tongue is a language other than Hindi, are prepared to establish schools in which their children can be taught for the early stages of their education in the mother tongue, Government will encourage and assist them in their endeavours. In this connection the Government is now considering proposals for the establishment of a cultural centre for Southern Indians at Nadi, where it is expected that teachers competent to teach Southern Indian languages may be trained for the future. Both the Director of Education and I are in sympathy with these aspirations and I have undertaken to give practical effect to this sympathy at an early date.<sup>41</sup>

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39 CSOF28/209.

40 Secretary of Indian Affairs, CSO 442/38.

41 CSOF28/209.

Richards left the colony soon afterwards, and his successors did not honour his promise. But the government did agree to pay the cost of bringing two South Indian teachers from India to teach in Sangam schools. The first of them, N. Ramakrishnan, arrived in 1939.

The Sangam's insistence on the teaching of South Indian children in their own mother tongues was an integral part of its larger project to preserve the cultural integrity of the South Indian community. In a speech Patel prepared for Sangam leaders welcoming Governor Sir Harry Luke in 1939, the reasons were explained:

Our Society has been working in Fiji for the past sixteen years for the uplift and cultural renaissance of our Countrymen in Fiji. Through force of circumstances we who lay claim to one of the oldest if not the oldest culture of the world found ourselves after a stay of fifty years in this Colony a community who had lost all their culture and traditions. The Education of the people was neglected during that era of Fiji's History and consequently whatever material benefits may have been gained by our countrymen were offset by the loss of social traditions and cultural background which is so essential to the life of any civilised community. Though the traditions were forgotten the desire for Education and cultural uplift lived in the hearts of these pioneers and it was out of this desire that this Society was born. Men who, though illiterate, had passed through the sternest school of life and realised that their children ought not to go without the blessings of Education.<sup>42</sup>

This was a powerful plea from a community shouldering the dual burden of colonial neglect and North Indian prejudice. Its very survival as a cultural entity was at stake. But this predicament evoked little sympathy among the other Indians. They were happy to have Hindi taught as the lingua franca of the Indian community, and understandably so, as it worked to their advantage. They also wanted more instruction in English. In this instance, however, what was good for the goose was not good for the gander. Or, as the Sangam leaders put it, learning another language before one's own was like putting the cart before the horse. Patel's involvement in the Sangam's affairs deepened with the arrival in 1939 of Swami Rudrananda, sent to the colony by the Ramakrishna Mission. As already mentioned, Rudrananda remained Patel's closest life-long friend in Fiji, his spiritual counsellor and confidante and his most dependable ally in his political struggles.

By 1939, Patel had been in Fiji for more than a decade. These were tumultuous times both for the Indian community as well as the colony as a whole. The Indian community was emerging from the shadows of indenture and demanding its due place in the colony that was now their home. The colonial government resisted their challenge and succeeded in arresting social and political change. The 1930s were also personally unsettled times for Patel. He had entered the political stage and made his mark, but narrowly failed to get elected to the Legislative Council. It was the first of three electoral defeats for him. Still, tumultuous as the 1930s were, even more unsettled times lay in the future.