

Cane farmers: Fiji's unrewarded peasants [USP Students Association newspaper UNISPAC, 1974]

[Notes by author (2 April 2012):

1. In 1974, there were a number of cane farmers who faced the trauma of expiring land leases in Koronubu and Field 40 in Ba, and the Fiji Government was quite unsympathetic. I was then a USP lecturer in mathematics, but three USP student friends *kerekere'd* me to take my old Ford Anglia "bomb" for their field trip to Ba: Jayant Prakash (later a High Court judge), Rajendra Prakash, and Vimal Madhavan (later The Fiji Times Sub-editor). The human stories they elicited from the affected farmers encouraged me to write this article for UNISPAC produced then by student friends.

2. In hindsight, UNISPAC then was a radical and astonishingly solid student newspaper. The 1974 edition with my article in it, also had a brilliant seminal expose article by USP student Mesulame Lutumailagi, on the atrocious conditions faced by Fijian workers at the Emperor Gold Mines. The *UNISPAC* and the student intellectual climate blossomed in those years with the contributions of students like Jone Dakuvula, Claire Slatter and Vanessa Griffin, who all went on to greater things.]

3. I also went on to write a more substantial article on the cane farmers' plight, appearing in the special 1979 edition of USP's *Journal of Pacific Studies*, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the arrival of Indian indentured labourers to Fiji. I did not then think it strange for a Gujarati from Toorak in Suva to be writing on the problems of the Giritiya cane farmers of Fiji. In recent years, however, I have noticed with deep sadness, that many prominent descendants of Giritiyas have adopted blanket vitriolic attitudes to people of Gujarati origin in Fiji.

Introduction

It all started simply. A British colony in the South Pacific needed a cash crop to make itself financially self-sustaining. Gordon, Fiji's first governor, saw sugar as ensuring the prosperity of the Islands and in 1879, from a country seven thousand miles away, the British Colonial Government brought the first of the Indian indentured labourers.

Recruited by fair means and foul, they came fearfully, under hardship, to a land whose people had customs and an outlook on life that was poles apart from their own. They were brought by the legal government of this country under contracts of five years, with an option of renewing it for another five years. After the second term, they had the choice of repatriation at the expense of the British Government or of becoming residents of Fiji with privileges "no whit inferior to those of any other class of Her Majesty's subjects resident in the Colony".

Why did the British Government initiate this seemingly disastrous experiment in international migration? At that time, the move appeared logical. The tottering Fiji economy needed a controlled labour force that was prepared to work long hard hours for a minimum of remuneration.

The other Islanders had proved unsatisfactory for the same reasons Gordon did not press for Fijian labour. A communal people already living comfortably on their own land were not prepared to work under tough conditions on someone else's land for the pittance the planters offered. Indian indentured labourers had proved satisfactory in Mauritius, where conditions were similar to those in Fiji.

Far from their homes and hence easy to control, the Indian indentured labourers had no choice once they were out here. Under frequently inhuman conditions as slaves they sweated from dawn to dusk. They achieved at fearful costs to themselves what the colonial government had wanted them to do. They made Fiji stand on its feet.

SUGAR: ECONOMIC BACKBONE OF FIJI

In 1921, sugar exports were 84% of the total domestic exports. In 1973, fifty two years later, sugar contributed about 60% of the exports. It would be interesting to calculate the total extent to which the sugar revenue has generated the economy. Needless to say, Fiji's economy would collapse were the cane farms to stop producing. (All the data following was from the Shephard, Eves and Denning Reports).

Table 1

Year	Total Exports \$000	Sugar Exports \$000	Sugar as % %
1921	4,916	4,106	84
1961	20,869	12,112	58
1964	46,242	36,024	78
1973	52,373	34,666	66

Almost a hundred years after their arrival, the farming descendants of those indentured labourers are still virtually slaves. For in 1882 at Fiji's request, came the redeeming capitalist, the COLONIAL SUGAR REFINING COMPANY.

In the early days, because this company's survival ensured the survival of the Colony, the Colonial Government provided the plantations of the C.S.R. and other white settlers with the cheap Indian indentured labourers.

With the end of the indenture system, the C.S.R. abolished plantations in favour of small 8-12 acre farms leased by Indians for growing cane on contract to the sole miller, C.S.R.

The advantages to C.S.R. under the system were many:

- * the risks of hurricane, flood etc. were borne by the growers.
- * the C.S.R. did not have to invest so much capital
- * a cheap labour pool was created for the mills
- * most important, being a monopoly dealing with "coolie" farmers instead of white settlers, the C.S.R. could set any price for cane under any conditions: hence, maximising their profits.
- * The smallness of the farm and the strict supervision by field officers ensured that the farmer never saved enough to break free from the system.

The mills made fantastic profits at the expense of the growers by taking the gross receipts and before dividing, they ensured they made no loss by first:

- * Subtracting their milling costs.
- * Subtracting 11% of the milling costs as "head office" expenses
- * Taking off 3% of the value of their assets as depreciation (not the original value but a constantly revalued assessment of their assets)
- * Subtracting two thirds of any savings on costs.
- * Not adding the value of Molasses to their gross receipts.
- * Double counting of `maintenances when calculating 3% depreciation.
- * Depositing various sums of money into `capital reserve' out of the gross receipts.
- * Use of grants from the Sugar Stabilization Fund and the Capital Development Fund for capital development and then subtracting 3% depreciation as part of the `Milling costs.

The remainder was then divided between the growers and the mills.

When the mills were transferred to S.P.S.M., C.S.R. showed "much financial expertise" through debenture and share issues and "they did very well out of it" to use Lord Denning's words.

They took out nearly \$6 million out in cash.

What did the 15,000 farmers get? A very simple analysis gives a rough picture.

Table 2

Year	Sugar \$000	Molasses \$000	Total \$000	Farmers \$000	Farmers Share %
1961	12,112	3,000	15,112	7,359	48.7
1963	29,240	3,000	32,240	22,903	71.0
1965	25,344	3,500	28,844	14,546	50.4
1967	24,184	3,500	27,684	13,692	49.5
1969	28,717	4,000	32,717	15,741	48.1
1970	31,972	4,000	35,972	22,010	61.2
1971	33,272	4,500	37,772	20,240	53.5
1972	34,809	4,500	39,309	22,162	56.4

Notes:

(1) Except for the boom prices in 1963, before 1970, 15,000 growers received roughly 50% of the industry's proceeds while the ONE milling company received the other 50% even though the farmers bore all the risks in the industry

(2) C.S.R. did not consider the value of the molasses as part of the gross receipts and the price per ton Fiji has been getting for molasses had been very much less than the open market prices.

(3) 1970 was the year of Lord Denning's award and thereafter the farmers were slightly better off but not much more.

WHY HAS IT BEEN POSSIBLE FOR THE CANEFARMER TO BE EXPLOITED?

The farmers, being mainly Indians have had no political power commensurate with their numbers and economic contribution. They are inadequately represented in the decision making chambers in Fiji (i.e. Legislative Council or Parliament).

They have been divided even though their interests would surely have been best served by one body. There is an Alliance influenced body of farmers and a Federation influenced body of farmers.

But above all, the main factor contributing to their lack of recognition has been the Government of Fiji. In the early years the interests of the Colonial government coincided with the interests of the C.S.R. because survival of the revenue producing company ensured the survival of the Colony.

Hence the Government ensured cheap indentured labourers. In later years the colonial government still gave support to the mills. During the 1921 strike by growers, the N.Z. Navy was summoned to the Colony. During the 1939 strike the three Indian Government members resigned in protest over the treatment of the Indians and in the 1943 strike, troops were used to quell uprisings.

Even the minimum wages of the mill workers were maintained at a low level thus enabling the mills to make even higher profits.

1970:	27.0 cents per hour
1971:	32.5 cents per hour
1972:	40.0 cents per hour
1973:	43.2 cents per hour

What has government contributed to the welfare of the farmers despite its rhetoric of wanting to boost agriculture in Fiji? The recently announced fertilizer subsidy is available for all farmers except cane farmers.

In view of the ninety years contribution of the sugar farmers, it would be an interesting exercise to calculate just how much the government has spent in building schools, dispensaries, water supplies and roads for the canefarmers.

Compare that with the \$30 million plus super highway being built for our honoured transient guests, the tourists who line the pockets of but a few.

In another country, the Government's disregard for the economic backbone of the country would have ensured its ejection of election time. Here the Government has been able to get away without giving that just and meaningful recognition.

WHY DOES THE CANEFARMER NEED SPECIAL ATTENTION

The simple fact is that after 90 years of labour, the farming descendants of the indentured labourers are not only just as poor as before, but may even be in considerable debt in contrast to the millers and the rest of the country who have benefitted hugely.

An important factor in bringing about this situation has been the price that the farmer has been paid for his cane by first the C.S.R., then the S.P.S.M. and now the F.S.C.

Cane prices

The farmers have been constantly asking for a fair price for their cane. Their demands in the past have been denied by the mills (helped by government) because of the mill's monopoly and their desire or need to make high profits in order to: (a) obtain "fair return" for their investment in a "risk" industry. (b) pay dividends to their shareholders. (c) enable replacement of worn out plant and machinery.

The C.S.R. (and S.P.S.M.) made their profits which repaid their investments many times over and when they left, they received the golden handshake from the Government of Fiji. Enough said about them.

The F.S.C., being a Government owned body, has no need for high profit especially in view of the huge replacement reserves built (and general reserve) built up over the years and the fact that the shareholders are now the people of Fiji. Higher prices for cane would be but one way of redressing the injustice of the past.

SIMPLE FARM ECONOMICS

What does the average farmer earn? Table 3 gives a rough estimate.

Table 3

Year	Contracts	Cane (000 tons)	Tonnes/ Contract	Cane Price/ tonne	Farmers' Receipts Per contract
1965	14,798	2,171	147	\$6.70	983
1969	15,596	2,339	150	6.73	1,009
1970	15,542	2,840	183	7.75	1,416
1971	15,549	2,505	161	8.08	1,302
1972	15,612	2,203	141	10.06	1,420
1973	16,533	2,456	149	10.06*	1,494

For 1972, the average contract farmers would have earned \$1420 part of which he would have received when his cane first rolled into the mill. Prior to his first payment he would have survived on credit from the storekeepers. How much could the farmer save from his receipts?

Consider his costs:

Rent on land \$150 to 300
 Fertilizers 200 to 360
 Harvesting costs 300 to 400
 Farming implements? Labour costs (whole family working) Transport costs (if there are no lines)

400-600

Total costs: \$1050 to 1460.

How much does he have left after also paying for: Housing expenses, school fees, bus fares (considerable because schools are far).

An indication of how poor the general cane farmer is may be deduced from the simple fact that the Inland Revenue Department is able to extract from 15,000 farmers a total tax of \$300,000 or approximately \$20 per farmer.

DEBT

It is not surprising that many cane farmers therefore end up in debt especially after fulfilling some heavy social responsibility - for instance, a marriage in the family. The question remains: who are they in debt to?

The frequent scapegoat has been the storekeeper yet the President of the Ba Chamber of Commerce has asserted that farmers have had very strong links with the storekeepers - links which have been forged over two or three generations of trading. Further it is the large firms to whom the farmers are in debt, especially after capital outlays. Obviously, thorough research needs to be done and the results publicised in the interests of the country.

The cane farmer therefore has not only borne all the risks of the industry but has also been haunted by the specter of poverty.

On top of all that he has been plagued by what is commonly referred to as the land problem.

LAND PROBLEM: INSECURITY OF TENURE

The cane farmer has seen his father sweat away a lifetime in an industry which has left him relatively unchanged in material wealth. He is now given a 10 year or a 15 year lease with no guarantee of renewal. What incentive is there for him to develop the land? He has seen leases expire, and the farmer moved onto stony, hilly ground where even the train lines don't go. He has seen others reap the benefit of his sweat for a while and then let a fruitful farm revert to bush.

He has seen land being reserved with no compensation to the farmer who has spent his lifetime on it. What uneducated illiterate farmer is going to complain when he knows that if he does, he may not get another lease at all?

RESERVED FARMS

Of the many farms that went into reserve, many are not producing at all. Some, run by Fijian farmers, are frequently less than 50% efficient now.

Many more are being run by Indians under the iniquitous system of sharecropping (adhia). The Indian farmer works the land and when the cane is harvested half the proceeds go automatically to the person with the lease on the land. (This is strict contract agreement drawn up by a lawyer).

Rough figures for Koronubu and Field 11 are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Location	No of farms	No reserved	No under Fijians	No sharecropped
Koronubu	130	40	40	50
Field 40	50	15	15	20

LOSS TO FIJI

For each farm not producing cane (say 150 tons of cane per farm) Fiji loses a potential 150/8.3 tons of sugar i.e. roughly 18 tons. At current world market prices (up to \$1,000 per ton!!!) these 18 tons represent a loss of \$18,000.

HOW MUCH OF FIJI'S UNDER-PRODUCTION IN CANE CAN BE WE ATTRIBUTED TO THE LAND POLICIES OF THE LAND OWNERS?

Analysing the production figures again, the years before 1972 regularly produced more than 300,000 tons. For 1967-1971, the average production was 327,000 tons.

Compare with the production for the years since then:

1972	275 000 tons	(-52,000)
1973	268,000 tons	(-59,000)
1974	270,000 tons	(-57,000) (Est.)

What would the 1974 production shortfall of 57,000 tons of sugar have earned at current market prices?

Sugar Price/ton	Lost earnings (\$)
\$200	\$11,400,000
\$400	\$22,800,000
\$500	\$28,500,000
\$1000	\$57,000,000

How important these extra earnings would have been in our economy becomes obvious when we note that our total domestic exports for 1973 were valued at \$50,000,000.

In view of the huge costs of our underproduction not just to a particular group but to the whole of Fiji, there have to be a serious and honest analysis of the factors involved since 1970.

The number of contracts have increased but the acreage of cane being harvested has decreased as Table 5 shows.

Table 5

Year	Total Acreage Harvested (000 acres)	No. of contracts Contracts	Average Acreage/ contract
1970	114	15,542	7.3
1971	117	15,549	7.5
1972	108	15,612	6.9
1973	112	16,533	6.8

Obviously many of the contracts did not supply their quotas.

How many of these quotas were on reserve land?

It should be also asked how many of these completed quotas were a result of the unwillingness on the part of the farmers to grow cane in view of their rejection of the whole cane farming system.

RESERVED LANDS AND FIJIAN PARTICIPATION

It is obvious that the farms whose leases expired were reserved in order that Fijians could be introduced into the sugar industry. The motives of leaders who desire greater Fijian participation cannot be questioned. There is a need for Fijian participation in this sector.

What is questionable is the manner in which these objectives are being achieved at the expense of another people who are not being recompensed.

In Fiji, there has always been a tendency, (one fostered by those that sought to divide and rule) to regard Indians as aliens rather than as full citizens of Fiji despite the fact that they were guaranteed all the privileges of the other inhabitants of Fiji.

The Fijians are accorded the security that the N.L.T.B. provides them with regards to land. Is there a comparable privilege for the Indians?

Remember that the guarantee of equal privileges was given to the Indians in 1879 67 years before the N.L.T.B. was formed.

There is a greater role that government can play by making available more crown lands rather than N.L.T.B. lands hence eliminating one source of conflict. "N.L.T.B. LANDS• Much uncertainty in the sugar industry has been over native lands. It does not improve relations between tenant and landowner if a farmer finds an agent on his lease taking an inventory of his meagre possessions.

A farmer does not deliberately fail in his rent payments but is rather forced to do so by circumstances beyond his control.

There has been criticism of the shortness of tenure of native lands. Obviously, to give some security to the farmer, the tenure has to be greater than the ten and fifteen years being offered. On the other hand, the tenure should not be so long that the landowners will not be able to utilize the if they so wish in the foreseeable future. There has to be some compromise.

Much can be gained for both Fijians and Indians if there is greater cooperation between the N.L.T.B. and the cane farmers.

It is significant that of the Fijian farmers who settled in the reserved land, "the more successful were those who had lived among the Indian farmers and were well aware of the methods used and the sustained effort needed in cane farming.

Some scheme may be possible where by Fijian farmers were settled among Indians and the displaced farmers are subsidised in settling up other farms after adequate compensation for their work in the previous farms.

It is certain however that high-handed action by any one group can only worsen the situation.

THE PRESENT CANEFARMER IS ONE WHO KNOWS THE INSECURITY OF THE MOMENT. HE HAS NO RESERVES TO FALL BACK ON BECAUSE HE HAS NEVER BEEN ADEQUATELY COMPENSATED FOR HIS WORK IN THE PAST. BUT HE HAS TO SURVIVE. WHAT CAN HE LOOK FORWARD TO?

THE FUTURE

It is imperative that the enormous contribution of cane farmers both in the past and now, be recognised not just by mere words but in concrete terms by our leaders.

The farmers have in the past attempted to solve their problems but with little success. Unable to get land for farming he has urbanised. Many more are now talking of diversifying to other crops. A significant number are becoming more militant and an obvious result will be greater political action.

Given the increasing value of the sugar exports as balancing our tremendously expensive imports, the farmers are becoming more aware of their economic muscles, muscles which they may be forced into flexing, to the detriment of Fiji.

It would be to the credit of our leaders if they would act now and render justice to a people who have fulfilled far too long the role of slaves in Fiji.