

Fiji: a paradise lost - an interview

by GARTHE WAITE

Satendra is currently enrolled as a first year Master of Arts student here at UNB, majoring in sociology. Though only twenty-six years old, he has led a very active life in his homeland of Fiji. Over the course of this interview Satendra explains some of the issues which have arisen in the micro-status as well as offering views, while describing some of his own activities.

Q To begin then, perhaps you could, by way of introduction Satendra, tell us a little of Melanesia, its people and politics.

SATENDRA Let me begin with some very general comments about the South Pacific. Most of the islands are post-colonial or still colonial small island states. Most have received independence fairly recently, as late as 1970. They share not only their small size but also isolation from each other and centres of trading; features common to the third world generally, as well as underdevelopment, high unemployment, crime, etc., These kinds of issues...

Fiji is located at the border of Polynesia and Melanesia so its people share general features with both. The population is less than 2 million. It received its independence in 1970 after one hundred and sixty years of British colonialism. Since independence Fiji has been ruled by one party. Political life in Fiji had been very reasonable through the '70's but deteriorated very rapidly in the eighties to the extent that

Public relations workshop

A public relations workshop for natural resource managers is being sponsored by the University of New Brunswick's Continuing Education in Forestry Department, December 9-11.

The workshop is designed to help managers with limited resources stay on top of their daily public relations responsibilities.

Session instructors include David Folster, a veteran freelancer and proprietor of Sugar Island Writers; Harold Hatheway, writer, consultant and ex-CBC producer; and Robert Miller, president of Atlantic Media Works.

The workshop will be held at the new Hugh John Flemming Forestry Complex. Further information is available from Alex Dickson, Coordinator of Continuing Education in Forestry, University of New Brunswick, Bag Number 44555, Fredericton, N.B. E3B 6C2 (506) 453-4501.

political dissent, political opposition, and even tolerance of debate are civilly curtailed activities in the country now.

The other South Pacific Island states share many characteristics with Fiji although it is the largest of these islands. They are all economically vulnerable societies; heavily militized, or they play an important role in super power conflict and super power rivalry, particularly in terms of nuclear testing, bases, etc.

Some islands remain colonies like New Caledonia, semi-colonial states as the Marshall Islands or French Polynesia, but the significant point is that even those countries that are independent or so called independent reflect features common to societies still colonial.

Q Let's talk now about your own life, in terms of your previous university career and the shaping of your political attitudes.

SATENDRA I did my undergraduate degree in Fiji at the University of the South Pacific. Early on, my activities revolved around the activities of the university..., but you will probably appreciate that in underdeveloped countries, students who make it to universities are extremely privileged. You compete with so many others for so few positions.

For example eleven to fifteen thousand people compete for no more than one hundred places at the university. So it is extremely competitive, and your education is in most instances, financed by the government because to be able to privately afford a university education is beyond the means of say, 99% of the people of the South Pacific.

Any university student I think, in this context, quickly comes to realize that his world does not end within the university boundaries... that he has a wider responsibility to his people, his region, his country, and this kind of realization..., this kind of consciousness is very visible in such an environment.

My own political active life emerged around this. I had been a student leader for some years as an undergraduate, I had also in those years..., helped found the peace movement both in Fiji and in the South Pacific generally. Although there had been peace movements in the seventies, they had died away quickly. They were not only revived but given a bigger structural base.

It's here that I first ran into problems with my own government, (as well as governments of the region) and I also,

for the first time realized that governments are not what they seem to be and often do not stand for issues and interests they proclaim to be their own. I and many of my friends were victimized, quite severely. I lost one year of my studies because of this..., by my government. After leaving university my activities in the peace movement, the "Nuclear free and independent Pacific" movement..., increased and as well I, and so many other people who I had attended university with began to play a more active role in the politics of the country during the 1980's, when the government for example, moved to ban some of the trade unions.

Q Getting back to the peace movement, what sorts of issues was your organization trying to address?

SATENDRA - The question of peace is central to the people of my country and to people in the region generally. The Pacific Islanders have provided the guinea pigs, the lives of human guinea pigs for the nuclear powers...

Let me just quote some numbers. The French so far have tested over a hundred nuclear devices in Murora..., and over forty-three U.S. at Einwetak. The British, thirty-two on Christmas Island, ..., U.S. twenty-three on Bikini Island, an island which no longer exists, and seven at Johnston by the U.S.

These numbers are staggering. People in the industrialized north generally feel that the knowledge derived from these tests are from places far from human civilization... that have little or no effect on human beings. This is totally fallacious.

For example, if I may quote again, three islands in French Polynesia have the second highest cancer rate in the world. These are the official French figures. Every child on two of the Marshall Islands in Micronesia have to undergo an operation for thyroid cancer before the age of twelve. These are naked realities and there are so many more...

This is one of the issues around which the peace movement emerged. The other area is demilitarization.

The period of the seventies and eighties saw the dramatic militarization of this area, this part of the world that seems so far away (but remember, you are talking about one third of the surface of the earth and all its mineral and sea bed resources).

So the islands have become some

kind of pawn, a pawn which can be sacrificed in super power rivalry and super power conflict... and the militarization process is accelerating at a dramatic rate, something of course which increases the vulnerability of the micro-state with little in their defense except to arouse some kind of moral consciousness among the people of industrialized countries about the immorality of such activities in sovereign regions. So that has been the central focus of the peace movement.

The peace movement had its first small victory this year when it was able to influence the governments of the region to introduce a nuclear free zone. But this victory was short lived when the governments undercut the nuclear free zone treaty and very consciously created loopholes so as not to disturb their super power or imperial masters.

Now, the peace movement generally has come against its biggest task, the reconceptualization of the whole meaning of peace.

There is a unanimous realization throughout the movement that the question of peace is tied to the question of justice, that you can't have one without the other. It is something we never thought we'd have to confront

because it makes the struggle so much more difficult. You cannot have a genuinely peaceful region, a nuclear free region, without an independent region... and this means waging wars of colonial liberation, of liberating from colonial masters, particularly in the French regions.

My own very harsh experience in this has been through my own struggle with my own government and the struggle of people in the peace movement in Fiji against my government, a government of people who have been exposed to the hazards of nuclear warfare, radiation, etc.

Our cousins in the other islands have been directly exposed and are suffering and dying from it. We have a government which is insensible to the needs and aspirations of these people and which is prepared to BAN laws or create laws to suppress the peace movement or to keep the peace movement from taking the struggle outside their own countries to make a greater impact. And many people have suffered.

I have suffered personally but these things are prices which are paid in any struggle which you believe is legitimate, which you believe is achievable!"

Agenda SPECIAL STUDENT UNION COUNCIL MEETING December 4, 1986

Time: 8:00 p.m.

Closed Agenda

- (1) Approval of minutes distributed
- (2) Communications
- (3) Appointment of Recording Secretary
- (4) Standing Committee Report - Finance Selection
- (5) Bylaw with respect to financial entitlement
- (6) Bylaw with respect to executive officers
- (7) Striking Ad-Hoc Committee on Yearbook
- (8) Permission to execute loan agreement
- (9) Announcements = Notices of Motion

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