FOREIGNERS AT HOME: DISCOURSES OF DIFFERENCE, FIJI INDIANS AND THE LOOTING OF MAY 19

Susanna Trnka
University of Auckland

This essay focuses on Fiji Indians' reactions to the property destruction and ethnic violence that followed the 19 May 2000 coup. In particular, it explores why, in the first few weeks following the coup, Indo-Fijians despaired over the looting of downtown shops, rather than over other acts of seemingly more direct anti-Indian violence, such as the burning of Indo-Fijian homes and physical attacks against Indo-Fijian men and women. I analyze how Fiji's Sanatan Hindus discursively posited Indians, on the one hand, as central to the development of Fiji as a "modern," capitalist nation, and Fijians, on the other, as detrimental to national "progress." Looting, in particular, came to represent the demolition of all that Fiji Indians considered themselves to have built out of the nation of Fiji.

ON THE MORNING of 19 May 2000, just after coup leader George Speight and his gunmen walked into the Fiji Parliament and took Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and forty-three members of Parliament hostage, crowds of predominantly indigenous Fijians broke into 169 shops and restaurants in the capital city Suva and began to help themselves to the contents. The looting was only the first of a profusion of illegal activities ranging from rapes and house burnings to peaceful roadblocks that sprang up across Fiji in the following months.

Much of the violence that occurred was ethnically focused, as Fiji's ethnic Indians, who make up approximately 44 percent of the population (Bureau of Statistics 1996), became the targets of frequent physical attacks from indigenous Fijian youths. However, it is difficult to assess just how

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widespread the violence was that followed George Speight's attempted governmental overthrow. Many incidents either were not reported or were not covered by radio, TV news, or the three major news dailies.[1] What is known is that interethnic violence occurred in major urban areas (most notably Suva, Nausori, and Labasa), small towns (including Korovou and Rakiraki), and rural farming areas (Vunidawa, Muaneweni, Dreketi) at a scale unknown in Fiji since the violence of *girmit,* or indenture, when South Asians first came to Fiji's shores.[2] About fifteen kilometers from Suva's downtown, in the middle- to lower-class, predominantly Hindu village in which I conducted fieldwork in Nausori, in the first two weeks following the coup, the boys' side of an Indian-run Christian school was burnt down, and a small Hindu temple on the main road was burnt beyond recognition, with all of the *murti,* or religious images, irreparably damaged. In a neighboring village, Indo-Fijian houses were stoned and some of their occupants reportedly injured. In the first few days after the coup, no one dared to leave the neighborhood, afraid that even a quick trip to the market or post office might invite attack. None of the popular communitywide Hindu *puja*s, or prayers, were held, Indo-Fijian women rarely ventured out of their homes at all, and, as in all of Fiji, schools were shut. Just over an hour's drive into the interior in Vunidawa, Indo-Fijian homes were set on fire, their occupants fleeing into the surrounding bush. There were also reports of Indian women being raped. On a national level, Mahendra Chaudhry, the first ethnic Indian prime minister, was being held hostage and at times subjected to brutal treatment. In the beginning, it was commonly thought that the coup itself was motivated by the desire to remove ethnic Indians from political power in Fiji. (Since then it has become generally accepted that big-business interests and splits within indigenous Fijian society, along with possibly other, still unknown, factors, were more central to the impetus behind the coup than was anti-Indian sentiment.)

This essay focuses on how Sanatan Hindus responded to incidents of governmental instability and escalating interethnic violence and what these responses reveal about shifting notions of "Indian" identity in Fiji. Approximately 80 percent of the Indo-Fijian population in Fiji is Hindu, and the majority follow Sanatan Dharm. Sanatan Hindus in Fiji describe themselves as Hindus *(Hindu log)* or, along with Muslim and Christian Indians, as Indians *(Hindustani log),* and I use both terms here. I do so despite Kelly's warning that the identity of "Indian" or "Indo-Fijian" was constructed by Europeans (1995a) and that it in fact erases the multitude of internal differentiations made among "Indo-Fijians" themselves, such as Gujarati or Indian, North or South Indian, Muslim or Hindu, Arya Samaj or Sanatan Hindu (Kelly 1998).[3] My purpose here is not to argue against Kelly's point

but to explore the ways in which Sanantan Hindus used the notion of a pan–Indo-Fijian identity (namely, that of being "Indian") to make sense of the impact of the coup on their lives. In doing so, I focus on shifts in Hindus' perceptions of Indians' and Fijians' relations to capitalism and to the modern capitalist state as well as their corresponding reassessment of the stakes of being Indian in Fiji in the first five months following the May 19 coup.[4]

As a departure point I find it useful to adopt Fredrik Barth's now classic notion of ethnicity and ethnic change (1969). Rather than assuming a static, primordial ethnicity, Barth's groundbreaking move was to contend that ethnicity should be understood as constantly shifting, constructed and reconstructed through interactions between members of ethnic groups and those they consider outsiders. By doing so, Barth rephrased the guiding question of research on ethnicity from a documentation of the supposedly "objective criteria" that constitute ethnic groups (such as shared language, dress, and so forth) to a focus on the interactions between ethnic groups, particularly on the ways in which these interactions give an ethnic identity "continual expression and validation" by its members (1969:15, 17). As he puts it, "The critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (ibid.:15).

While Barth's insights into the transactional nature of ethnicity cannot be overestimated, recent ethnographic treatments have begun to reexamine the historical and symbolic importance of the meanings ascribed to the various attributes of ethnic identity. Linnekin and Poyer (1990) and Nicholas Thomas (1992), for instance, argue that the "cultural stuff" of ethnic-group identification is hardly irrelevant to the ways in which ethnic boundary lines are drawn. Thomas, in particular, turns his attention to the historical processes by which ethnic identities are created in the first place, urging awareness of the specificities of the processes of "accommodation and confrontation that shape particular understandings of others" and the ways in which these processes "thus determine what specific practices, manners, or local ethics are rendered explicit and made to carry the burden of local identity" (1992:213).

My intention here is likewise to employ Barth's appreciation of the constructed and oppositional nature of ethnic boundary lines without losing sight of the historical processes behind the selection of the "cultural stuff" that particular ethnic identities entail. Specifically, I argue that by drawing on well-known racial stereotypes that were in circulation before the coup,[5] Sanatan Hindu responses to the events of May 2000 reinforced many prevailing racial conceptions. However, certain events of May 19, such as the wide-scale looting of Suva and Nausori that became a central theme in

Indo-Fijian community dialogues during the coup, sparked a renegotiation among Sanatan Hindus of the boundary line between "Indians" and "Fijians" on the basis of Indo-Fijian perceptions of increasing disparities between ethnic groups. The result was that, in local discourses about the coup, Hindus represented themselves as the harbingers of modern capitalist commerce and posited Fijians as generally outside of and antagonistic to the world of modern national development (and so greatly reduced the historical role of the British that in some Hindu villagers' narratives it is erased completely). Finally, I examine the cultural, historical, and political dimensions behind such racial stereotyping of Fijians and Indians to suggest not only how these discourses of oppositional identity make use of Sanatan Hindu religious values, but also how they are closely rooted to the historical positioning of Indo-Fijians and Fijians in relation to capitalism.

Talk of Looting

The looters of May 19 were predominantly indigenous Fijians of all ages—youths, elderly women, middle-aged men, women carrying infants. Some of them were violent, leaving behind smashed windows, broken glass, and burnt-out buildings. But others appeared, from the television news footage shown later that night, to be serenely strolling into stores and simply pocketing the merchandise. Not that everything that was stolen could be pocketed—people walked off with large kitchen appliances, and pickup trucks drove away with stolen TVs. Taxi drivers found themselves being paid with a portion of the takings—be it a piece of jewelry or one of a dozen frozen chickens. The looting continued for hours. A garment factory owner I spoke with claims he let his employees off for the day, thinking they would get their children out of school and go home early, but instead they flocked to downtown Suva to take part in the pillaging. Police or military presence was almost negligible, and those present did not actually do much to stop the looters. Police Commissioner Isikia Savua (who has since been investigated but cleared of colluding with the coup leader) was shown on the evening's television news coverage standing alongside his police officers in the middle of the street, forlornly watching as shops were broken into, shaking his head in a show of disbelief and despair (whether it was genuine despair or merely a show of it is another question that has yet to be answered).

It is out of such scenes of chaos that the topic of looting came up over and over again in the conversations of many of Suva's and Nausori's residents. However, given everything else that was going on in the country, it is at first a bit surprising that, from May 19 until about the end of June,[6] Sanatan Hindus spoke of the looting as by far the leading example of how

terrible *(kharab)* the coup was for Fiji. Why did their despair over the coup focus primarily on looting rather than on the hostage taking, the school and temple burnings, the stoning of homes? What do the ways they talked about looting say about Indian identity and about ethnic relations in Fiji in general?

The majority of the shops in Fiji are owned by "Indians," "Gujaratis" (migrants from the Indian state of Gujarat who came independently to Fiji, many in the 1920s and 1930s), and "Europeans" (anyone of white skin including Australians, Americans, and New Zealanders) rather than "indigenous Fijians" (the native inhabitants of Fiji), although they employ members of all ethnic groups. But it was not only shop owners who were visibly affected by the destruction. Even persons whose primary relationship to business enterprises was as customers spoke of the looting as if it were a personal attack. The concern over looting was thus not about the destruction—or potential destruction—of one's own property per se, but about assaults on commercial establishments and commodities in general and on what they represent to the Sanatan Hindu community.

One of the first public statements regarding the looting came from indigenous Fijian political leader Adi Kuini Speed, the coalition government's deputy prime minister, who depicted looting as a moral breach of the rules of Christian society. Expressing shock and deep dismay, Speed, who was lying ill in a hospital bed in Canberra, Australia, gave a radio statement in which she said that she grew up thinking that to be Fijian was to be caring, generous, and kind but that the actions of the looters and rioters were flagrantly "unchristian" (interview with Adi Kuini Speed carried on FM 96 on 20 May 2000). Many indigenous Fijians reacted likewise. Sera, a young indigenous Fijian schoolteacher, echoed Speed's moral outrage over the lack of Christian ethics displayed by the looters, as she shared with me how she was struggling to make sense of the coup as "God's will." While initially she did not agree with Speight's actions, she felt compelled to make sense of them in terms of Christian theology. Sera was not alone in her attempts to reconcile God's will with the workings of Speight, and the solution she later embraced was that the former president, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, had, as a member of the Freemasons, been practicing Satanic rituals such as the drinking of human blood and that Speight was thus God's prophet in the fight against evil (a story that was widely spread and led to the burning of the Levuka Masonic lodge). This explanation provided her with a sense that no matter how chaotic and confusing the events of the moment, Speight was acting within a moral order, and his purpose was in fact divinely guided.

In contrast, the Hindus with whom I spoke did not describe the looting or the coup itself in overtly religious terms. They seemed to be disturbed

primarily by its economic implications. Many of them expressed great distress over shopkeepers' losses of goods and money, over insurance companies' refusals to cover these losses, as well as over the physical damage to business establishments and how long it might take to "rebuild" the downtown. Community reactions to looting involved an almost complete lack of allusion to the *Ramayana* or the *Geeta* (the main holy books used by Sanatan Hindus in Fiji), references to moral codes of behavior, or appeals to a sense of divine justice. It was not until months after the coup that a few such allusions were made (one woman, for example, told me that a-*pandit* [priest] explained to her that the source of the conflict was the internal struggle over land and that the Fijians were fighting among themselves over property rights in the same way that brothers turn against each other in their fight for land in the *Geeta*), but these references were few and far between and did not constitute the same level of community debate, much less public debate, as did those about Christian ethics and the coup.

Rather than try to compartmentalize and contrast these two sets of discourses—talk of looting as a breach of Christian ethics and talk of looting as economic destruction—I want to suggest something altogether different. Specifically, a close look at Hindus' talk of looting in terms of economics unearths another kind of discourse, this one about the connections between religious morality; the development of a modern, capitalist state; and the social position of Fiji's Indians. But first, it is necessary to know something in general of the role that Indians have played in Fiji.

A Brief History of Indians in Fiji

Following Fiji's cession to Great Britain in 1874, the colony's first governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, devised a scheme that would enable Fiji to generate income without "endangering" the traditional way of life of its native peoples by requiring them to enter the labor market. Drawing on the models of Indian indenture in colonies such as Mauritius and Trinidad, where he had previously held the position of governor, Gordon implemented the importation of men and women from India to work Fiji's sugar plantations. Between 1879 and 1916, some 60,000 Indians were brought to Fiji. Having lost their caste status and survived often appalling conditions, the majority of *girmitiya*s, or indentured laborers, stayed in Fiji after their indenture contract expired.

Later to be called "Fiji Indians" or "Indo-Fijians" in the social science literature and simply "Indians" in common speech as well as by a myriad of postcolonial bureaucracies (school records, medical records, the Fiji census, voter registration, and so on), Fiji Indians were first categorized as laborers

or "coolies" (Kelly 1992). The creation of the identity of "Fiji Indians" was part of a larger project of compartmentalization of Fiji's populace into three primary ethnic groups (the "three-legged stool")—indigenous Fijian, Indo-Fijian, and European—that was undertaken during the era of British rule (Lal 1995; Scarr 1988). Even before the "coolies" were herded together into the cramped living quarters of the plantation "lines"—resulting, for Hindus, in a breakdown of caste and, for those of South Indian origin, in the imposition of a unifying language, as they were forced to adopt a dialect of Hindi now commonly referred to as "Fiji Hindi"—there were conscious attempts to wear away distinctions of caste, class, and religion in the holding bays for indentured laborers in Calcutta and Madras (Sanadhya 1991; Kelly 1988). What resulted was not only a legacy of historical, social, and cultural difference between Indians and Fijians, but also the creation of shared cultural, political, and historical features—including the legacy of indenture itself—that have led some scholars to assert the existence of a pan-Fiji Indian identity (Jayawardena 1980; Brown 1978). Others have resisted this idea, arguing that the multitude of differences among "Fiji Indians" makes the classification, while useful in analyses of the racial taxonomies employed by the colonial state, detrimental to understanding and accurately portraying the histories and contemporary realities of those currently classed under it (Kelly 1998).

The Contemporary Politics of Race

Any analysis of politics in Fiji, past or contemporary, cannot, however, escape noting how prevalently such racial or ethnic categories are employed. While there is disagreement on the nature of the true forces behind Fiji's political upheavals,[7] it is clear that they are undertaken in the name of purported racial solidarity among Fijians and racial prejudice against Indians. Major General (then lieutenant colonel) Sitiveni Rabuka, who conducted the 1987 coups, states that his aims in overthrowing Bavadra's government were to restore power into indigenous Fijian hands. Drawing on the popular conception of Bavadra's labor coalition as an "Indian government," Rabuka claims that the coup was undertaken in order to combat "the Indian design for political domination" (2000:10). One of his motivations in supporting the rewriting of Fiji's constitution, he asserts, was the transformation of Fiji into a Christian state. "I believed then," he writes in retrospect, "that if my Indian brothers and sisters could be converted to Christianity, then the relationship between the two main communities would be less tense, and we would have more in common" (ibid.:13). Rabuka's anti-Indian sentiments were not new to the world of Fijian politics. They were echoes, though

echoes with the political and military might to back them up, of decades of previous calls to banish Indians outright from the country, most notably those of outspoken *taukei* leader Sakeasi Butadroka.

In the late 1990s, Rabuka softened his stance. Recognizing the limits of the 1990 Constitution, which was widely acknowledged to be discriminatory against Indo-Fijians, he played a leading role, in collaboration with the Indo-Fijian political leader Jai Ram Reddy, in the writing of the new 1997 Constitution, which was to pave the way for a more multiethnic government. It was a step for which Rabuka has been praised but also one to which he attributes his loss in the 1999 election. He explains:

> The poetic irony is that Mr. Reddy and I, the main architects of the 1997 Constitution, which was designed to bring about greater national unity, were essentially rejected by the voters. That was the price we had to pay for bringing in so much change in the process of Fiji's transition. Mr. Reddy was probably punished by the Indians for getting too close to Rabuka, the coup-maker. My own SVT Party lost ground because it was seen as selling out the Fijians. But our multiracial vision for the country was right and I have no regrets about embracing it. (Rabuka 2000:18)

While the Rabuka of 2000 was known to espouse the necessity of a multicultural, multiethnic Fiji, his recent statements on politics and race in Fiji have also reiterated his strong anti-Indian bias (Sharpham 2000).

In reporting about politics and nationalist activities, the Fijian media knowingly or unknowingly often reinforce the notion of Indians as outsiders in Fiji. For example, a Fiji One TV news report following Butadroka's death on 2 December 1999 described his political aims as the removal of "Indians and other foreigners" from Fiji. Many indigenous Fijians use similar language, distinguishing "locals" or indigenous Fijians, on the one hand, from "Indians and expats" or "foreigners," on the other.

To some extent, these sentiments of being outsiders, or at least not quite "locals," were voiced by Indo-Fijians themselves. One middle-aged Hindu woman, for example, told me that many Indians did not think that Fiji needed an Indian prime minister. "It is not our country," she said and then paused. "Well, it is our country but . . . you wouldn't want someone from outside leading your country, why should the Fijians want it?"

None of the Indo-Fijians I spoke to, however, debated their right to live in Fiji. A common distinction was made between owning land and renting it, with Indo-Fijians claiming they have no desire to deprive Fijians of their

land but do want security in their rights to live on it (83 percent of land is legally reserved for indigenous Fijian ownership, making land rights, both leases and ownership, probably the most contentious issue in Fiji). Indo-Fijians also acknowledged the emotional attachment that generations upon generations of living in a location can produce. Many speak at great length and with great fondness of their homes in Fiji. The Indo-Fijian poet, novelist, and one-time minister in the ousted Bavadra government, Satendra Nandan, has poignantly expressed the bond between Indians and the land of Fiji through the metaphor of the human body. In his novel *The Wounded Sea,* he depicts the mass migration following the 1987 coups as the dissolution of the human body, describing it as "the hemorrhage of exodus" flowing "like the blood from a ruptured artery" (Nandan 1991:134). Thus, while they have not been in their home country as long as their native counterparts, as Nandan notes, Indo-Fijians' roots in Fiji have a profound psychological and emotional depth. "One gets used to one's country as one gets accustomed to one's body," he writes (ibid.:147). (For more on how emotional bonds to geographic places are evident in Indo-Fijian fiction, see Trnka 1999.)

A Belonging Tinged by Violence

Whether in fiction or in the narrative accounts related by Indo-Fijians among themselves, violence is never far away from these stories of belonging. In mid-July 2000, during the height of the coup, a middle-aged Hindu woman told me the following story about her natal village in Vunidawa in Naitisiri Province (from which George Speight hails). We had been sitting in her kitchen in Nausori drinking tea when I overheard the final phrase of a chant being repeated over a Hindi-language radio station. "This is our country" *(Yeh desh hamara hai),* a class of schoolchildren droned. I repeated the phrase and Devi corrected me: "This country is also ours" *(Yeh desh hamara bhi hai).* Then, almost without a pause, she told me:

> About four or five years ago in Vunidawa, during rugby time, my brother was going out to milk the cows. Bhabhi [brother's wife] was doing the dishes, when she heard someone in the house. It was a Fijian who knew them, who was Brother's friend. He was wearing a stocking on his head, so you could see only his eyes and nose. He came up behind Bhabhi, and when she turned he hit her with a piece of firewood, cutting her hand. [She gestures between the thumb and pointer finger.] She cried out and Brother heard her. When Brother came into the house and saw the man, they began

> to fight, and the stocking on his face was pushed up [she gestures]. An uncle heard the commotion and came in. The Fijian ran off into the bush.

"But they knew the Fijian, he was their friend?" I asked.

Devi nodded. "They used to exchange *dalo* and cassava," she said. "They did not pay him money. He was their friend." She continued: "They called the police, but they did not do anything. It was about five years ago."

"Why during rugby time?" I asked.

Devi looked at me as if this should be obvious. "Because they [i.e., the Fijians] need ticket money and money to buy things at the game, not just *dalo* and cassava," she said.

Almost without exception, when asked to explain to an outsider why such violence occurs, Hindus turned to the explanation of differing attitudes toward work between Indians and Fijians. A common self-description of Sanatan Hindus is that Indians are generally extremely hardworking. In comparison, they regard Fijians, regardless of age, class, or gender, as "lazy" and generally uninterested in work. Fijians were frequently described as living the "easy life" without labor but as "wanting everything" that Indians produce. These attitudes are furthermore interpreted as necessarily leading Fijians to reap the rewards of the modern economic system (namely, mass-produced goods) by breaking its rules, primarily through theft.

John Kelly has commented on the religious basis of Fiji Indians' approach to work in his essay "Fiji Indians and the 'Commoditization of Labor'" (1992; see also Kelly 1991, 1988). Kelly's interest is in distinguishing attitudes toward labor between "Indians" and "Gujaratis," but his insights are also useful in looking at interethnic tension. Advocating "a cultural approach to capitalism" (1992:97), Kelly states that for many Hindus work is understood in terms of a Gandhian conception that advocates labor as a crucial means of cultivating the relationship between the devotee and God (ibid.:108). As part of *bhakti,* the devotional form of Hinduism that is widely practiced in Fiji, "labor is necessary to self-development and labor in a capitalist enterprise is labor in service to community and god" (ibid.:113). This religious dimension of work is sometimes explicitly stated by Hindus, as when, a few months after the coup, in late July, Devi explained to me: "Hindu people are blessed because they are very hardworking and therefore they grow, [they are] always gaining, generation after generation is blessed. Fijians pray a lot, but God does not hear [them] because they do not work, they do not sweat. God blesses the Hindus. It's a payback [the English term]."

Sanatan Hindu responses to the looting thus engaged the terms of a wider religious discourse on labor relations. A moral value is placed on men's and

women's labor outside of its productive value or market value. Labor is valued for what it means in terms of one's relationship to God, in that work—and in particular the "sweat" or physical exertion of work—becomes as much as an offering as the incense, flowers, and *prasad* (food offerings) that form the Sanatan *puja*.

But to leave the story here would be to extract what is really one part of a much larger narrative of identity, religious morality *(dharm)*, and the nation. While it is possible to focus on the relationship of Sanantan *dharm* to notions of work as does Kelly, what became increasingly vocalized in the months following May 19 was a discourse on the interrelationship between Sanatan notions of work, ethnic difference, and national development, often encapsulated by Hindu responses to looting. In order to understand why such significance was attributed to looting, it is important to understand the intensity of the disruption and sense of dislocation to which the coup gave rise.

Absurdity and Despair

Among the most widespread and enduring reactions to the coup were expressions of the absurdity of the events that were occurring. In its simplest form, the sense of absurdity was conveyed by a shaking of the head and a wordless look of disbelief, or by wordless and uncontrollable laughter, as when a week into the coup a group of men assembled at the local shop read in the newspaper about how long the continued negotiations between the military and the hostage takers were expected to take and broke into a round of laughter. On another occasion, when I asked a group of people about a nearby school that had been set alight the night before, they only shook their heads and laughed. For many, their inability to put their sentiments into words was a reflection of the profound sense of confusion and despair they felt in terms of both their immediate activities and their sense of the future.

The best way to characterize their responses to the situation might be to say that they found it absurd. To borrow a definition from Merriam-Webster's dictionary, the absurd is the "ridiculously unreasonable, unsound, or incongruous" or that which has "no rational or orderly relationship to human life" (2001). The term conveys the kind of unbelievableness and incomprehensibility with which many in Fiji approached the events following the coup, though it gives little insight into how such a state might be communicated. In Fiji, people responded to the confusion of the coup by making direct statements of disbelief, by laughing and making jokes, and by comparing life to fantastic fictional narratives, especially popular film. The pace of events, both in terms of the political maneuvering taking place and the spread of violence, was often hard for people to keep up with, and many

expressed a lack of comprehension of what was happening. Thus, the most common remark about the future, short or long term, was *"nahi sako jano,"* or "it cannot be known." Just as frequently, however, people remarked that the instability could not possibly carry on much longer and that very soon the situation must come to right itself, with a return to their regular routines of community prayer, schooling for children, and, very often, a return to work.

Confusion and often fear were frequently expressed through laughter and humor. The day after Fiji Hardwood Corporation, of which Speight used to be the chairman, was set on fire, for example, a neighbor who saw us on the street pulled over his car, shaking his head and laughing. "What is going on *yar* [friend]?" he cried out to my husband. A union organizer, he explained that there was some concern that his workplace might be the next to be torched. He laughed and pointed to the trunk of his car: "I have the whole office in the back!"

A spate of jokes, many focused on the coup's leader and his supporters, began on May 19 and showed no sign of waning over the next four months. Although joking, especially to diffuse tension or anger, was not uncommon before the coup, there was a proliferation of political and interethnic jokes after May 19 (and in fact on May 19 itself). Many made fun of the violence to which they or their relatives were falling victim. Others underlined the dislocation people felt and the desire to return a sense of normality to their lives. On his way to work on the first day after the daytime curfew was lifted, a young man mimicked jumping over land mines and dodging bullets on his way to the office. His wife a few days earlier, while watching the looting on TV, had exclaimed, "It's cashierless shopping!" and later, "It must be a rebate sale!" None of these jokes were standardized, and as far as I am aware, all of them were told only once. Like the wordless laughter, they were fleeting expressions of the absurdity and fearfulness of the situation people found before them.

Attempts to make sense out of the unlikeliness of the events occurring in their lives also led many to relate the coup to popular action films. Subramani has masterfully captured the attempt to make sense of experiences of unexpected violence by drawing on the popular narratives of film in his short story "Captive in Liberated Bush," which depicts the torture of an Indo-Fijian suspected of political subversion during the 1987 coups. Describing the character's perception of his abduction, Subramani writes: "He would probably end up in the trunk of a car, like the young man in the movie. For a moment he was amused by the thought that he and his captors had watched the same movie, sitting next to each other at the Regal on a Saturday afternoon" (1997:246–247). Many of those who experienced the unrest

of 2000 likewise noted that incidents of violence were "like a film," as opposed to what they expected from the realities of everyday life.

Along with attempts to regain a sense of mastery over, or at least comprehension of, the situation, there was a growing sense of despair over the overturning of normal social relations, expectations, and daily routine. It was not uncommon when visiting houses in the middle of the day to find the occupants sleeping because of job loss and unable to sleep at night because of fear of attack. Fear of burglary or attack transformed houses that had previously been easily accessible (during the daytime); they now looked abandoned with their curtains drawn, the front doors locked, and the front gates padlocked all day long. One family told me that they locked themselves into their bedroom each night so that if someone should break in to their house, he could help himself to their belongings without attacking them. For women especially, the complete halt of communitywide prayers often meant an end to socializing beyond the realm of their family relations, leading many to rely on the telephone for news and other forms of contact. As the situation wore on and there was still no sense of a governing body in charge of the country, and the evening curfew was extended yet another few weeks, women and men alike complained of boredom. Reflecting on the lack of work due to the continuation of school closures in early June, one schoolteacher remarked to me that the situation had become boring. "We can't leave the house, we can't do anything," she said. But Fijians, she added, can move about and are "enjoying" themselves. When I asked her how long she thought the situation would last and what sort of government might result, she shook her head as if to dismiss the question and said, "We just want to go back to work."

The bouts of boredom gave way to bouts of increased stress. In July in the interior of Viti Levu, Indo-Fijian families fearing their houses might be burnt would commonly leave their homes at night and sleep in the bush, to return to their homes in the morning. In the village in which I lived, there was great alarm on the night of 21 July 2000, when four rebels tested the resolve of the military checkpoint at a nearby bridge. The official news media reported that soldiers fired warning shots after four men drove a car across the bridge during curfew without stopping at the checkpoint. The men then abandoned the car and hijacked passing vehicles and drove off in the direction of Suva. That night the story spread over the telephone that this was actually a larger mobilization of Speight's supporters and that the village's small Hindu school was the next property to be taken, sending many into a panic. One man telephoned me after the shooting to advise me that (in the dead of night) all the women including myself must immediately flee the area because "four hundred Fijians" carrying lighted torches were

marching up the entryway to the village, ready to set all of the houses on fire. Nothing of this story eventuated, but it reflected the acute uncertainty and fear under which villagers were living. (Unconfirmed reports later suggested that on the same evening close to four hundred Speight supporters were preparing to quit their camp in Kolobo and were looking for another site to take over in Nausori.)

By September 2000, increased military and police presence led to an end to the worst of the violence. By this time the desire of many for the military's promised return to "normality" was so strong that they were eager for the widely expected "second coup" to take place, so that life might finally return to something close to its old rhythms and routines. The anti-Indian sentiments of Major General Rabuka were widely known, and if anyone needed reminding of them, two months before the May 2000 coup his soon-to-be published biography by John Sharpham was introduced to readers of the popular *Fiji Times* newspaper under the headline "Migration the Key: Rabuka." The article noted:

> Former Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka hopes Indians will migrate in large numbers. "We tighten the controls, then Fiji is no longer attractive to the Indian settler as it has been in the last 120 years," he says in his new biography. Mr. Rabuka said migration would reduce Indians to "manageable" levels. And he suggested that Indian dominance of the country would lead to Fijian intolerance. (Rika 2000)

With such racially inflammatory statements, Rabuka was not well liked among villagers. And yet, after months of unrest it was not an uncommon hope that Rabuka and former president Ratu Mara would be the ones to once more take the reins of power, as they at least might return some sense of stability to the country. (To date, a "second coup" has not taken place.)

Discourses of Development

In such a setting of disruption and overall social upheaval, talk of interethnic comparisons proliferated. A large part of these discourses of difference involved comparisons of Indian and Fijian approaches to labor, as described earlier. But there was also increasing talk of financial spending patterns and of the relationships between labor, spending, and the development of the Fijian nation.

While it was not unusual before the 2000 coup for Hindus to be critical of the widely practiced Fijian custom of redistributing wealth and goods, the amount of time and interest these topics raised swelled during the

months of unrest. The main criticism was of the ways in which employed Fijians treated money. Rather than saving and providing for the needs of their immediate families, it was said, Fijians were "unable" to save money and therefore were prone to spending a week's pay in a single day. Then, when their finances were used up, they would return to their Indian colleagues and request, or *"kerekere,"* more cash.

Most of the negative examples that Hindus gave were of Fijians' inability to save and wisely allocate resources for their family needs. But accumulation and investment are necessary for yet another kind of enterprise, namely, the further "development" of the nation. With regard to Kelly's statement that "labor in a capitalist enterprise is labor in service to community and god" (1992:113), it is necessary to ask, for which community is this labor undertaken? In different contexts labor—communal, familial, or individual—is undertaken for different communities. In discourses on labor after the coup, the notion of labor for the development of the nation often arises.

One of the "paybacks" for all the work Fiji Indians have been doing has been the development of Fiji. Development, or moving the country "forward," is described as the transformation of the dirty into the clean (using the religiously laden terminology of becoming *saf*), of the clearing away of the bush and the replacement of "jungle" with development. "When Fijians were here," Devi stated, gesturing around the village, "it was only jungle. Then Indians came and cleaned it." During a discussion of the local history of his village, another man told me: "Indians are the ones who developed this country. They did the hard work." (It is noteworthy that these statements leave out the role that not only Fijians but also the British colonialists played in the creation of Fiji as a developing nation, a point that will be further explored later in this essay.)

While these descriptions of difference draw on cultural and historical differences in labor and economic relations, what is lacking in them is an understanding of the rationales behind these actions—exactly how and why a redistributive economy might work, for example. Instead, Fijians' practices are interpreted as "shortcomings" in which the desire for pleasure overshadows any ability to plan for the future.

At best, both before and following the coup, Fijians were described by Indian villagers as living a *"jungli"* or primitive life outside of capitalist commerce, with small-scale violence (such as Bhabhi's attack) occurring when Fijians occasionally desired cash for commercial goods. But during the coup, the representation of Fijians' behavior as antithetical to that of Indians changed so that Fijians began to be depicted as directly hindering capitalist commerce and national development, by, on a mass scale, stealing rather than paying for goods, smashing down shops, and frightening away the foreign investment that is necessary to Fiji's financial well-being. Looting as

well as the other activities of the coup were often described by Indians as moving the country backwards *(piche)* in time. Differences arose only over how many years back in time, ten years, twenty years, or more. While watching a news broadcast about some of Speight's demands, an Indian woman exclaimed: "Indians have built everything we have. But they want us to go back to being laborers, like during *girmit.*" Some went so far as to depict such destructive behavior as nonhuman. "The Fijians are animals," one Indian man bluntly told me. "They want everything for free. . . . They look at us going ahead, and they want what we have."[8]

Talk of Fijians' destructive capabilities became part of daily conversation in the weeks following May 19. It represents not so much a change in the perceived relationship between Indians and Fijians but, in its images of destructiveness, a change in the stakes of that relationship. It is this view not only of Fijians' power but of their potentially destructive use of it that explains the fascination with looting. Many Hindus considered all Fijians as sharing the sentiments of the looters, whether they took part in the looting or not. And with Fijians not only making up the majority of the population in Fiji, but also in control of the majority of political power, Hindus perceived looting as the first sign of a very serious threat to capitalist commerce and thus to Fiji's status as a modern nation. The seriousness of the threat was in contrast to many places in the world, where looting is a weapon of the minority that might temporarily shake up the economic system but is not seen as a possible first step to the end of modern life. The civil disturbances in Los Angeles following the Rodney King verdict, for example, sent a ripple of anxiety through American life but did not seriously raise the possibility of the end of the capitalist economic order in California.

The imagery of Fijian destructiveness came hand in hand with a shift in Hindus' perceptions of what their place in Fiji might be. Before the 2000 coup, everyone spoke of relatives overseas and of their own, vaguely formulated desires to migrate. After the coup, anyone with the means and the ability began to pack his or her bags. No longer content to be foreigners in Fiji, many Indians have decided to call another country home. As early as the first week of June, two thousand people were applying each week for passports, while the average number of applications before the coup was seven hundred.[9] These numbers include Fijians and members of other ethnic groups who are currently also taking part in the exodus. However, according to the migration patterns reported by the Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics (from the months immediately preceding and following the coup), Indians have made up between 84 and 91 percent of the total population of migrants leaving Fiji each month.

Part of this exodus was fueled by Indo-Fijians' fears that Fijians' "inability" to plan for the future will be (or already is) the source of the irrespon-

sible spending not only of their family's income, but also of that of the nation as well. The May 2000 coup itself was explained by some as the overtaking of the country in order to satisfy the indigenous Fijians' momentary desires for money, status, and power, without taking into account the nation's economic future. And when the interim government was installed, villagers complained that the members of the new cabinet were all already "bankrupt" and likely to "spend" away the country's resources, leading the country into certain economic decline. (They were very likely making reference to the 1995 bankruptcy of the National Bank of Fiji, which has been popularly attributed to a large number of defaults on loans to ethnic Fijians.)[10] The suggestion was not only that the ministers were spending the money to line their pockets, but also that they were taking resources that belonged to the nation as a whole and redistributing them to Fijian recipients: not necessarily "stealing" but changing the rules to benefit Fijians rather than Indians. Thus, while observing the swearing-in of the interim government on television, a middle-aged woman exclaimed, "What do the Fijians want?" and a young girl replied, "They want *everything*, look at their budget," and went on to outline the ways in which government money was going to be channeled to Fijian recipients.

This was not a difficult task to undertake, as the interim government soon made public an explicit outline for rerouting funds toward indigenous Fijian beneficiaries in a document called the "Blueprint for the Protection of Fijian and Rotuman Rights and Interests, and the Advancement of Their Development." The stated objective of the Blueprint is the "advancement and acceleration of their [Fijian and Rotuman] development, so that they can participate on an equitable basis in the progress of our country" (Blueprint 2000). Its directives include rewriting the constitution to restrict the positions of head of state and head of government to Fijians, significant changes to the land laws in order to strengthen the legal powers of landowners over those of tenants, increased spending on development projects specifically aimed at Fijians and Rotumans, making an increased number of loans available to Fijian and Rotuman businesses, a tax exemption for Fijian companies, increased funds for Fijian educational scholarships, and reservation of 50 percent of various business licenses for Fijians.

The interim government's strategies can be in part attributed to the fact that, without the pejorative terminology, Sanatan Hindus are not the only ones making the comparisons between Indian and Fijian relations to labor. In a number of his speeches following the coup, military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini also spoke of Fijians' "inability" to incorporate themselves into the capitalist system. Referring to proposed changes to the constitution to better safeguard indigenous Fijian rights, Tarakinikini stated: "Constitution or no constitution, it still does not ensure prosperity

for the indigenous. Education is the key. Making sure that indigenous Fijians get a grip of what's called entrepreneurship; you know, being able to save for a rainy day, to be hard on ourselves today in order to guarantee a better tomorrow so to speak. All these things are alien to our culture" (Manueli 2000). Tarakinikini's views of ethnic groups' differing relations to capitalism were voiced in a different way by the indigenous Fijians whom I spoke to, many of whom called Indians "greedy" or said that "all Indians are rich."[11]

There are two points here. The first is that Hindus' notions of ethnic difference employ ideas not only about one's relation to labor within a capitalist framework but also about the use of money, investment, and the acquisition and distribution of goods. Building on the discursive linkages between capitalism, labor, and God (that have been so well documented in Kelly's discussion of *bhakti*) are comparative judgments of different systems of investment and redistribution and their relationship to the development of a "modern" nation.[12]

The second point is that while Hindus use religious notions of *bhakti* and work in determining ethnic differences, they are not doing so in a vacuum. The interim government (and the different governments that preceded it) is no stranger to the language of ethnic comparison. The terms of ethnic difference used by Hindus are drawn not only from Sanantan notions of labor, but also from the terms of debates on Fijian and Indian rights that are used in governmental and other public spheres.[13]

The problems with these discourses are many, but perhaps the most important is the way in which they take historically constituted differences in relation to capitalism and represent them as essential, unchanging cultural and ethnic traits. They do so by sidestepping the history of colonialism that placed Indians, first as indentured laborers and then after their contracts expired as "free" men and women, firmly within the relations of capitalist labor within Fiji (for an in-depth exploration of how British colonialists categorized Indo-Fijians as "labor units" or "coolies" as well as Indo-Fijian resistance to these identities, see Kelly 1988 and 1992) and through a system of "protectionism" kept the majority of Fijians out of the paid labor market. The divisions between "Indian" and "Fijian" "cultures" were moreover codified and enforced by years of colonial regulations, as many scholars have documented (e.g., Lal 1995; Kaplan 1998; Kelly 1995b). Instead, these discourses use the characterizations of "laziness," on the one hand, and "greediness," on the other, to create the image of a dichotomy of irreconcilable cultural identities. Discourses of ethnic difference furthermore ignore present-day realities of capitalism in Fiji, such as regional differences in government representation, productivity, and government spending, and cross-ethnic class differences.

What such ethnic stereotyping does, however, underscore are the tensions that exist around differing relationships to labor and financial spending power in Fiji—tensions that did in fact contribute to the political unrest. The coup can thus best be understood in terms of a crisis in one's relation to capitalism not by attributing these tensions to essential cultural differences, but by placing such discourses in the context of the complicated interplays of differing cultural values, class, regional diversity, and the historical construction of ethnic difference.

Though the tools for it were available, there were few serious attempts among villagers at a cross-ethnic class-based or regional analysis of the coup. Even when people realized that the impetus for the coup might, in part, lie within indigenous Fijian society and further recognized that more than likely a number of prominent ethnic Indian businessmen had financially supported Speight, the primary mode of making sense of the coup and surrounding events remained Indian and indigenous Fijians' contrasting relations to labor. The perceived boundary line between "Indian" and "Fijian" was reconceptualized to allow for new kinds of difference (of Fijians as being potential destroyers of modernity in Fiji versus merely belonging to another system of economic practice) alongside a reinforcement of the previously held notions of ethnic identities as based on relationships to capitalism.

Looting became a dominant theme in Sanatan Hindus' talk of the coup, because it was perceived as a direct assault on what Indians have made out of Fiji. It represented an undoing of over a century of labor, decades of it enforced labor under the brutality of *girmit,* that went into transforming Fiji into a "modern" state. In threatening to overturn the conditions considered necessary by many Indians for modern life, looting, for many, made their continued habitation in Fiji seem impossible. Expressions of absurdity likewise highlighted the sense of despair people felt as their daily routines, sense of safety, and at times comprehension of the events occurring around them were set off balance. But the perceived target of the attack was not just Indians, but the country as a whole, as the acts of looting and violence were seen as directly impacting the future chances of peace, stability, and prosperity of the entire nation.

What role—if any—narratives of looting will play in local histories of the May 2000 coup cannot be foretold. But if local narratives of the 1987 coups are any indicator, I suspect images of looting will be central ones. More than a decade later, one of the most common ways for Hindus to explain to an outsider the injustices of the 1987 coups was to describe the Sunday Observance Act. The Sunday Observance laws were put into place after the second coup in 1987. They were intended to enforce Sunday as a day of Christian worship and thus prohibited not only business activities but also non-

Christian gatherings. Without exception, everyone who spoke to me of the Sunday Observance laws stressed their limitations on labor. A common story was of Indian women taken away from their homes and forced to work in the military barracks, because they were caught washing their families' laundry on a Sunday. The focus was once again on work prohibitions, as opposed to the regulations against non-Christian public gatherings, including picnics or even the internationally publicized case of children taken in and beaten at a police station for playing soccer on a Sunday (Amnesty International 1987). The levels of ethnic violence in 2000 were much higher, resulting in the establishment of Fiji's first refugee camp for Indians fleeing violence in the interior. It is therefore likely that interconnections between references to interethnic violence and notions of labor, spending, and development, such as in the story of Bhabhi's attack, will continue to play a role in discourses of difference.

No discourse is without its ruptures, however, and Sanatan Hindus' talk of ethnic identity is no exception. In the midst of talking about the impact of the coup on their own communities, many Indo-Fijians wondered aloud, "What is the future of Fijians in Fiji?" One Indian man described to me how at the height of the violence he enlisted the aid of a Fijian friend to drive up to Vunidawa to rescue his relatives whose house was being stoned by Fijian youths. In the village in which I lived in Nausori, the men organized a patrol to guard the neighborhood from violence—its members were both Indians and Fijians. These ruptures, with their refusals to totalize difference, undermine state categories of racial division. And it is in them that Fiji's hope for the future lies.

NOTES

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1. On one occasion, for example, I was told by multiple informants that Indian customers exiting a local grocery store had been attacked and beaten, and had their groceries stolen. When I asked why this was not being reported in the media, they responded that the radio and television news feared that disseminating such stories

would incite further violence. The level of violence is even more difficult to assess when it comes to documenting cases of violence against women. On 16 July 2000, the news media announced that there was one "confirmed" case of rape (FM 101), despite widespread talk of numerous rapes of Indian women occurring in the interior region of Viti Levu. In the course of everyday conversation about the coup, I was told of at least three rapes of women known in the village where I lived as well as of other attempted rapes or violent attacks against women.

2. The violence of *girmit* has been widely documented. Notable sources include Kelly 1988 and Naidu 1980.

3. This is in addition to distinctions that can be made according to class, regional heritage, education, and, in some cases, caste.

4. My observations are based on research conducted in the Suva/Nausori area from January 1999 until the end of October 2000, with the exception of five weeks in late August and September 2000.

5. It appears that these derogatory stereotypes surface primarily during times of political tension. Mayer (1973), who conducted fieldwork in the early 1950s, writes that in times of conflict Indo-Fijians derided indigenous Fijians for their monetary practices but also remarks that such comments were infrequent. Norton (2000) quotes similar statements from Indo-Fijian submissions to the Constitutional Review Commission, whose task was to assess Indo-Fijian political rights under the discriminatory 1991 Constitution. While I heard occasional comments regarding a Fijian inclination to thievery and "laziness" before the coup, it would be difficult to exaggerate the contrast between those comments and the talk that became widespread during the troubles.

6. Interest in the topic of looting that took place on May 19 generally died down after the end of June. There was, however, brief mention of new incidents of looting that occurred sporadically in the following months.

7. Scarr, for example, upholds the banner of irreconcilable ethnic difference (1988), while Sutherland argues that the real impetus was class antagonisms (1992). Lal offers the most sophisticated analysis, citing a mixture of factors including class, provincial alignments, and tensions between chiefs and commoners (1995).

8. Before the coup, I never heard Indo-Fijians describe Fijians in such terms. A few months after the coup, animality became a common metaphor, most often expressed out of great anger and frustration, as, in another example, when a market vendor faced yet another round of the continuous looting of his produce by Fijian youths. "Bastards! They're animals!" he cried out.

9. Fiji One news, 5 June 2000.

10. My thanks to Matt Tomlinson for making this point.

11. Thomas furthermore notes, as regards differences in development and underdevelopment, that "rural Fijians constantly affirm the moral superiority of the Fijian way to the

customs of Indians and those of white foreigners, [but] they also lament that Fijians are 'poor'" (1992:223). It would be a gross simplification, however, to claim therefore that Indians and Fijians make the same claims about ethnic difference, for what is of interest here is the ways in which these differences are ascribed various religious, moral, historical, and political meanings that in turn are used in identity construction.

12. The reason for the differences in the discourses that Kelly and I document is likely that Kelly's focus is on the public discourses of Indo-Fijian political parties and religious bodies (including many published accounts), which do not employ the kinds of interethnic comparisons of relations to modernity and labor that I document in private discourses and gatherings among Sanatan Hindus. This discrepancy would also explain the differences in how Kelly and I treat Indo-Fijian pride in the development of Fiji. In 1988, Kelly wrote that Indo-Fijian public discourse following the 1987 coup reflected pride in their part in the cooperative, multiethnic effort to modernize Fiji: "All the races of Fiji were portrayed as pioneering, and Fiji was imagined as a harmonious synthesis of like-minded communities, come together for the same goals: modernization, spiritual and material development, and prosperity" (1988:415). He also briefly noted that many Indians who spoke in public with pride in Fiji's development "privately" expressed their own personal interest in migrating (ibid.:416). He did not, however, elaborate on why they wished to do so (i.e., what alternative vision of Fiji compelled them to do so), which may have involved notions of interethnic differences similar to those I explore here. (Similar expressions of ethnic stereotyping are, however, noted in Mayer 1973; Gillion 1977; and Norton 2000.)

13. This is a topic in its own right, demanding more than the brief attention it receives here.

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