

## Professor Subramani: A Fijian Public Intellectual

By Professor Vijay Mishra



Pictured: Professor Subramani

It is in the nature of nations to produce public intellectuals. It is not a self-defining term or a badge that would move one to declare from the rooftops, 'Hear me, I am a public intellectual'. But the term is used, as a kind of an honorary degree of sorts, as an acknowledgment in fact of a person's silent contribution to the nation. Often the contributor is a specialist in his or her field, say a historian, an anthropologist, an economist or even a literary scholar. The idea of 'specialism' is important because without a powerful body of published work you may not be taken seriously. In Fiji two historians stand out as public intellectuals: the first Asesela Ravuvu, a historian, who fashioned his writing as a defence of first nation people's rights; the second Brij Lal who had an uncompromising faith in democratic institutions and said as much to great personal cost. Earlier there was an anthropologist, Rusiate Nayacakalou, who brought an ethnographer's eye to questions of racial difference. And then there is the economist Wadan Narsey who dissects data with extraordinary precision and rarely errs in his judgement. All four have had something of value to say even if one has disagreed with them. To that select group Fiji is lucky to add another, Professor Subramani, a man who is Fiji's pre-eminent writer of creative prose not only in English but also in Fiji Hindi. His two novels in Fiji Hindi have made him the subaltern voice of Indian indenture, his achievement in this regard exceptional by any standard. A quiet, reserved, man he

has not ventured into newspaper essays on great men in history – Gandhi, Nehru, Mandela, Bishop Tutu, let alone A. D. Patel or Ratu Sukuna for instance – because he has a subaltern view of history and a sense of the role of people, the nameless crowd so to speak, in history.

It is to the University of Fiji's credit that its academic press has now published Subramani's manifesto for reform titled *Pandemic, the Wheel of Suffering: Higher Learning and Its Discontents*. It is not a collection of published newspaper essays but thoughts crafted in the genre of a manifesto, the kind of work that, looking back, one may regard as capturing a moment in history. Manifestos acquire historical depth over time; some turn into valuable reference points about an event – Edmund Burke's essay on the French Revolution is one; some are challenging cultural interventions such as C. P. Snow's 1959 Rede lecture on 'two cultures'; others are resurrected and used as an ideological document to advance a particular point of view towards political ends. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's essay on Hindutva (1923) is one such document whose historical origins are forgotten and the text's contingent anti-imperialist discourse transformed into a universal, timeless document. Subramani, a deep thinker, is aware of the aforementioned cultural documents but he is also conscious of the ways in which manifestos may be abused and misappropriated. Keeping this in mind his manifesto is self-reflective and self-revealing even as it is suggestively programmatic and analytical. So why is he Fiji's fifth public intellectual? I need to shift my attention to the short monograph itself.

Subramani is both a critic and a creative writer. He has a fine sense of when to draw himself back, when to function as a sociologist of culture and when to retreat into the beauty of language itself. The writer's craft is evident in the first few pages of the manifesto. To create, as in a film, an establishing scene is a narrative trick of old and here the scene created is the arrival of the current pandemic. Subramani traces the naming of the pandemic and finds in the naming a struggle over the power of the name. Is Covid -19 like all the other diseases either brought to Fiji or given a name – dysentery, smallpox, measles, leprosy, the Spanish Flu and the like? Or in our digital age has it gathered around it meanings well in excess of its danger as a disease? Subramani's essay opens with the arrival of Covid-19 as an existential crisis. Like other nightmares in history Covid-19 challenges us to rethink human

life itself. The scene is then set for a manifesto on tertiary education and its discontents in Fiji. In a rare speech given at a TISI Sangam Education Conference (in 1994 or thereabouts) he had told the participants, 'we should never allow ourselves to become second-class people.' He said that at a time when racialized politics had taken hold of the nation and he had the Fiji Indians in mind when he spoke. The manifesto is about education, but it applies to everyone because interdisciplinarity (which is at the core of his argument) is not simply a function of higher education; it inheres in all activity, making us conscious of differences at every level, difference in language, religion, race or class. Awareness of this makes us more responsible, and less likely to become a second-class people.

The pandemic produced a discourse defined by war metaphors and this in itself skewed one's reading of it. Subramani concedes that the pandemic is frightening but its nightmarish presence in the public sphere has turned it into an all-consuming symbol that has foreclosed other urgent issues such as climate change, poverty, the march of global capitalism and the like. To Subramani the pandemic is an occasion to rethink our priorities and the place of the individual in society and culture. Subramani argues that the pandemic should force us to examine the place of the self in culture, how we are affected by our surroundings and why we should now pause to self-reflect. It is in this context that the manifesto shifts gear and addresses the idea of the university itself. The immediate context of his ideas is the University of Fiji with which he has been associated for a number of years. At the university the pandemic with its periods of isolation and the push towards self-sustenance has shown students and staff alike the virtues of 'slowness'. The latter, Subramani, quoting the great philosopher Nietzsche, argues is not to be confused with laziness; rather it signifies, as slow cooking does, the importance of steady critical self-reflection. He makes the case that the move towards corporate structures has ignored the principle on which this the people's university was founded. And that principle was grounded in precisely a concept of 'slow education', an education aimed at decluttering the mind and making one aware of one's place in the organic totality of all life-worlds.

Using the University's medical school as an 'epicentre' Subramani suggests ways in which the university can recapture its original ethos as a 'people's university', an

ethos lost in the university's current selling advertisement: 'work ready, global ready, future ready'. This radically reformed medical school (which attracts some Fiji's best and brightest students) should open itself to interdisciplinary studies so that questions of health and well-being, including mental well-being, are incorporated into the curriculum. A holistic framework would ensure that interdisciplinary thinking such as the culture of health, the place of suffering in life, the healing power of nature, an awareness of ecosystems, the natural cohesiveness of itaukei society would establish a new covenant between the sciences and the humanities. The idea of an all purpose 'slow' learning is at the heart of transdisciplinary knowledge. To Subramani the medical school as an epicentre is simply a structural move as any other school could perform this function. The manifesto recognizes the

interconnectedness of life, the need for empathy, the importance of student-centred learning (the pandemic made distance learning a necessity) and the importance of democratic institutions in the nation. The founding fathers of the University of Fiji were aware of the importance of the ideology of service in an institution. That ideology of service is not new to Fiji as Christian missionary work was based on it. Subramani concludes by saying that the pandemic has forced us to turn to our own inner resources, it has made us understand that the idea of being is linked to principles of wholeness as the self is also self-in-society. It has also made us aware of a key pre-modern virtue: how to live with a lot less. The pandemic is seen by him as yet another moment in history that provides a context for a revolutionary act. What interdisciplinarity would bring is an awareness of why we study what we do and how within an interdisciplinary

perspective specialist knowledge when transformed into a profession would make us aware of our ethical responsibilities as citizens. Subramani stands apart as modern Fiji's finest public intellectual. Although as he modestly acknowledges, his manifesto is not an order or a law, it is not in any way prescriptive, I want to suggest that it is a work that all educationalists should read, and journalists should celebrate, and in that celebration also acknowledge Subramani's own quite astounding achievements.  
– Vijay Mishra

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