Visitors to India, travelling on buses or trains, find that one of the first subjects raised by strangers who fall into conversation is religion. There are many religions in India. Probably because Hinduism, as the majority faith, is so eager to discover all the many possible ways of seeking God, there is a surprising love of religious conversation.

When Fiji's first migrants arrived from India one hundred years ago they brought with them this national curiosity and openness about religious teaching and experience. The evidence suggests that the will to share religious knowledge and experience between social classes increased rather than diminished as a result of the passage out. There were several reasons: separation from Mother India, eating at the same tables on board ship, the passing of people, with some trepidation, over the dark ocean, broke down the caste barriers that were taken for granted in the village. From the point of view of classical Hinduism, Muslims and Christians were also in any case followers of two of the many ways to the Supreme Spirit. Once the social and occupational prohibitions associated with caste structure had gone, there was no reason why the Lord Jesus should not become a Guru, or teacher, alongside the Lord Krishna or the Prophet Mohammed. Fiji society thus became potentially favourable ground for the meeting and dialogue of religions at the popular level.

The religious climate into which the immigrants came was different from India. Part of the unspoken code of personal conversation among British administrators in Fiji may be summed up in the words "No religion please, we're British." In general also, the Australian managers and field officers of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company were more likely to use the words Jesus Christ as an oath than a term of reverence. The Fijians, overwhelmingly Methodist, had no such problems about vocalizing their beliefs, but were prevented from doing so by culture and language barriers. Their traditional spirits and ancestor beings such as Degei, in his form as a great snake,
were still widely believed in. Rural migrants from India responded readily to such popular pre-Christian belief. Virtually no attempt was made by the Fijian-speaking Church to share the Christian Gospel with the newcomers. In its Fijian form, deeply influenced by Tongan missionaries, it would in any case have been hard for the migrants to grasp. At the same time it is notable that the Fijian Church was sending out missionaries in large numbers to the Papua New Guinea islands. A single attempt was made, under the auspices of the Australian-based Methodist Mission, to spread Christianity among Fiji Indians by means of an Indian-born catechist, who rejoiced, in spite of being an Indian, in the singularly non-Indian name of John Williams.

Williams, who came from Faizabad in the U.P. in India, was in Fiji from 1892 to 1894, when his wife became sick and he returned to India. He had poor support from the leaders of the Methodist Mission and suffered from isolation and loneliness, but he estimated he had 1650 people attending Christian worship, established ten preaching places, and had ten people under instruction for church membership when he left.

By that time many immigrants were out of indenture and seeking a new future in a strange environment. The one person who is still universally regarded in Fiji as having come to grips with the religious needs of that period from the Christian side was Hannah Dudley. As a missionary to people of Indian background she had style. She had been in north India. She voluntarily became a vegetarian, saw at once that Suva was the vital centre for the future, and made her simple evangelical approach meaningful in action by her educational and social work. She, like Williams, ran foul at some points of the sizeable European-dominated Methodist Mission establishment, which did not bestir itself to any extent to understand the Indian population until it became alarmed about the numbers who stayed on after indenture, beginning in 1900.

The point in treating Christian inadequacy for religious dialogue at such length is to underline what is known from other evidence about the openess of the Fiji Indian community to help from any religious source during and immediately after the first ten years experience of life in Fiji. Far beyond that period, up to the end of the indenture system in 1919, Fiji was comparatively open ground for people to share their religious faith, festivals, and resources for
living. Narak, hell, was a general description of life in the labour lines. Women suffered indignity, conditions of work on the whole were crowded and pitiless, the expiry of the agreement was felt as a return from drudgery to opportunity. During and after indenture religious teachers, both Hindu and Islamic, worked among the people.

The best known Hindu Pundit was Totaram Sanadhya, a north Indian Brahmin who was himself an indentured labourer. He landed in 1893 and spent the usual five years hard work identifying himself with the needs of his fellow-labourers. By patient self-instruction, reading and hard work, he fitted himself for the task of Pundit. He knew that most of his friends were illiterate. As he moved about and aided people in the lines with their personal problems he gathered them and taught them out of the religious books he found in the possession of a few, particularly the Hindi version of the Ramayan, of the poet Tulsi Das. This north Indian classic of popular devotion thus became familiar to more and more people, whatever their places of origin in India, through oral recitation, public readings, and the festivals of its hero, the Lord Rama. Ram, celebrated as God, an incarnation of Vishnu, and a readily understood manifestation of the Supreme Being, thus established a hold on the religious devotion of a majority of the Fiji Indian people. He has held his place ever since.

Witness to the readiness of all to respond to the message of Ram and his kingdom of righteousness and light has quite recently been born by Shaligram Sharma, writing in Shanti Dut in 1976; he movingly describes the singing of the Ramayan in the labour lines, where all, even South Indians, fairly quickly learned to speak a form of Hindi closely related to the language of the epic in Tulsi Das rendering:

After the long day's hard work, as they sat in the evening, the CSR Company's lines rang to the Dohas and Chaupais of the Ramayan. To clear the jungle they had to use with their own hands the axes, knives and other tools, and to bear the overseer's cruel whip on their backs, but on their lips were the Dohas and Chaupais of Tulsi's Ramayan. This was how these helpless folk in those days relied on Ramayan, because it had been written by such a saintly
poet of renunciation, and in it is a
great inspiring power."

Totaram, who had been one of them, met among the
indentured workers after 1900 another religious
teacher of a different stamp, the tireless and
lantern-jawed John Wear Burton, who came as a
Methodist missionary from Australia to the Indians,
lived at Nausori, and did his best to preach in his
faulty Hindi and redress the grievances of the
immigrants. He was quite unable to compete with
Totaram. For one thing, he had no idea of how to sing
a Bhajan. But for present purposes his genial personal
friendship with Totaram and his desire to understand
him brought about a genuine meeting point for
religious in Fiji. In public they would interject in
each other's meetings, but always in a spirit of
humour rather than harsh combat.

Burton returned to Australia in 1910, Totaram to
India in 1912. Totaram inspired a young Indian man
of letters, Benarsidas Chaturvedi, to edit and publish
Totaram's memoir of his time in Fiji. The work came
to the notice of Mahatma Gandhi and his associates,
who were working for justice among Indian indentured
migrants on plantations in Mauritius, the West Indies
and Fiji. One of those associates, the controversial
Anglican missionary to India, Charles Freer Andrews,
was to come to Fiji for the first time in 1915.
Andrews' collaborator in Australia in drawing attent­
tion to the bad side of indenture was Burton, by then
General Secretary of Methodist Missions in that
country. There were many reasons, economic and
imperial, why indenture was drawing to its end.
Totaram, Chaturvedi, Burton and Andrews ensured that
before it closed the moral critique of its inhumanities
should be shouldered publicly by representatives of
two very different religious that met in Fiji -
Hinduism and Christianity. Totaram Sanadhya proclaim­
ed the Kingdom of Ram; J.W. Burton the Kingdom of
God, with Christ as King. The Pundit once said, in
Fiji, to the Christian preacher: "Do you dream of a
Kingdom of Truth? So do I; and when this Kali Yuga
(age of vice) is past then Satya Yuga (reign of truth)
will come."

Communication at such a rare level between
Christianity and Hinduism during and after the indent­
ure period was accompanied by close contact between
Muslim and Hindu among the indentured labourers. In
one way the encounter was inevitable: conditions in
the lines were so crowded that those who practised their religion could not fail to be aware of each other. Muslim prayer to Mecca was made alongside the singing of mantras or parts of the Ramayana. In another sense, adherents of each of these two faiths sensed under the adverse conditions they faced that their trust in God was a source of hope and moral strength. They did not conceal their traditional differences, but each knew the other in his trial was seeking the face of God.

Most of those Girmityas interviewed recently by Dr. Ahmed Ali recalled how the respect generated between Hindu and Muslim spilled over into attendance at each other's festivals when workers were out of the agreement and into free labour in Fiji. The spontaneous pleasure people felt in each other's communal festivities - Ramlila and Holi on the Hindu side, Muharram for the Muslims, and others. It was understood that the beliefs behind the festivals were separate, and in many ways incompatible.

Din Mohammed told Dr. Ali:

'There was no religious conflict. We were all one. Whether Hindu or Muslim we ate each other's food ... If we had religious celebrations or readings in our homes they would come.'

Govind Singh, another of Dr. Ali's respondents, confirmed the general picture. 'We celebrated the Holi festival,' he said, 'but Muslims did not take part in Holi'. 'They made it clear that it was not their festival. 'We, however, used to meet socially'. A third Girmitya, Bujawan, recalled that 'everyone, whether Hindu or Muslim took part in the tazia'. Every estate used to build a tazia, the paper edifice erected to celebrate Muharram, and then they all used to converge towards one place. The tazia of Muharram, a symbol of a Shia feast though unacceptable to strict Sunni Muslim orthodoxy, (to which most Fiji Muslim subscribed), could still be seen attracting both Muslims and Hindus in crowds until quite recently. In most cases their original purpose, the celebration of a saint of the minority Shi'ite group, was not fully understood by the revellers, who treated them with innocent, more or less secular, delight.
Between 1900 and 1920 the friendly co-existence of varying religions in Fiji gave way to growing alienation under new influences. People who had been close under conditions of adversity formed free settlements as farmers when their contracts expired. The institutional life of mosque, temple, and school inevitably shaped itself around community in religion and language. Religious teachers and educated lay leaders took over the guidance of local groups, both Hindu and Muslim. Gujarati merchants and lawyers migrated as free settlers; Sikh farmers from the Punjab arrived, bringing with them a high monotheistic religion and a spirit of marked distinctiveness. Islam in Fiji with its preference for Urdu over Hindi, and its assertion of the exclusive claims of Arabic for true worship, underlined its special identity. The Arya Samaj, a minority reform movement within Hinduism, entered the scene in 1902 and has since then been influential out of proportion to its small membership in Fiji. As with most passionate reform movements in religion, the Arya Samaj was combative, against the broad mass of Sanatan, or orthodox Hindus, whom they regarded as corrupted by late accretions, against Islam, Christianity, and British dominance, which they tended to regard as being part of a single undesirable opposition to their beliefs, in both India and Fiji. Islam reacted vigorously against the Arya Samaj from one side. The dispersed forces of other Hindus rallied against them on another. Ahmadiya Islam, a strongly missionary reform movement with its headquarters in what is now Pakistan, entered Fiji in the 1930's as a militant minority opposed to both the Sunnis and Christianity. Its arrival stiffened divisions, all of which were spelt out carefully in literature circulated among the increasingly literate population.

If, without going into detail about personalities and events, we think of this period to 1920 as a time when all religious groups, including Christians, busily cut up their territory into smaller fields and cultivated them intensively, we have the clue to developments. Dialogue and tolerance gave way to ominous distancing of religions from each other, in preparation for open confrontation on a broader scale in the years between 1920 and the very recent past.

Within Hinduism lines of division were clearly drawn between rival organizations. After 1927 Arya Samaj missionaries were active in preaching and
founding schools. Their Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, or representative organisation was spearheaded by Pundit Vishnu Deo, who also took the lead in fighting for increased Indian participation in government. The Fiji Muslim League, formed in 1926 consolidated Muslim self-awareness and claims for separate consideration by the government. Hard-working Sikh free settlers brought with them their distinctive religion, with its cohesive Khalsa, or brotherhood, and its Gurdwaras, or temples. Indian Christians were a small minority, as they had been during indenture. The 1976 census gives their numerical strength as four percent of the Indian population. They were, and are, divided among themselves. Christianity, though it has been an indigenous religion of small proportions in India for at least 1,700 years, has been considered among Fiji Indians as fundamentally a religion for Europeans. The opinion may be understood in view of its tendency to approximate expatriate ways in the worship and customs of its converts of Fiji Indian background. Christian schools have been influential among Indians, but few of their outstanding leaders have opted publicly for Christianity.

The largest organized Hindu bodies, the Sanatani associations, the Sabha, emerged partly in response to Arya Samaj and Islamic challenges. During the 1930s Sanatanis became locked in public debate in Suva and elsewhere with representatives of the Arya Samaj and Islam. The issues included beef-eating and cow slaughter, the stories of the sex lives of certain non-Vedic Hindu gods not acknowledged by the Arya Samaj, and the use of tobacco. Sanatani Hindus were progressively welded together after 1930 by the profound influence of Pundit Ram Chandra Sharma, who came in that year to Ba at the request of a group of local people. This outstanding singer, composer, and teacher, with a capacity for warm friendship, soon became popular all over Fiji. His singing of the Ramayan and of bhajans quickly established him in favour. He stayed out of politics; his message was religious. But he used some of the hymns to Ram favoured by Mahatma Gandhi and stressed the theme that God was really one in his essence and that religious differences were essentially a matter of different outward forms and names. His great appeal, apart from his arrival coinciding with the nationalist movement in India under Gandhi, lay in the fact that he inspired the local Sabhas, or committees, of Hindus, to form, in 1934, the Shri Sanatan Dham Maha Sammelan Fiji, which became a focus for the Ramayan Mandli movement. These local bodies, formed for the teaching and singing of the
Ramayan as in the days of indenture and discharge, expressed in religious terms a longing for unified identity among Indian people in Fiji. When grouped together they could become a highly significant bloc of influence, political and cultural, but the underlying force binding them together was religious belief.

As a result of these developments of Fiji Indian self-awareness felt in religious terms larger forms of organization continued to emerge. Within the Indian community people are often accused of using religious allegiance to gain political leverage and further personal ambition. Possibly so, at the same time those who pioneered nation-wide bodies and made them strong were often devout and well instructed adherents of their own faiths. Their ancestors came from India where the hard and fast lines between religion, politics and daily life are not drawn. Good faith in observers demands that unity of religious motivation with dedicated leadership be respected.

Out of the many local Hindu Sabhas, or associations, under Ramchandra Sharma's leadership, the Rishikul Centre had emerged in the early 1930s at Nasinu, six miles from Suva. Its committee was significantly called the Shri Sanatan Dharm Rishikul Maha Sabha. The title was a direct answer to the Gurukul movement among adherents of the Arya Samaj. Both aimed to strengthen education based on the religious and ethical teaching of Hinduism as they understood it. The influence of this educational advance within the numerically strong Sanatani wing has been strong. Christian schools, which obtained government subsidy early, prepared many Fiji Indian children for life, but very few of them embraced Christianity. At the end of their school careers they understandably identified themselves with the strong Hindu-based belief and conduct of their wider families and social groups, especially, as Gillion has shown, because it was a means of reacting to the dominance of a small European minority in Fiji.

The culmination of the trend to consolidate Hindu unity under the Sanatani banner, across lines of division between Girmi descendants, North and South Indian language groups, and even political parties, is marked by two milestones. The first of these was the formation of the Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha in 1958, and its reorganization in
1973. The annual meeting of the Sabha has become one of Fiji's most important centres for the affirmation of common conviction based on the form of theism that attaches to the person of Ram in Fiji, with all that implies for religious devotion and standards of conduct. The most widespread forms of popular festival and social religious event in Fiji's Indian community cluster round the Ramayan. Here lies the religious grass roots motivation of the Sanatani majority.

There are, of course, many other forms of Hindu religious expression for Fiji people. No community holding Mahatma Gandhi in such esteem could fail to know his favourite book, the eloquent Sanskrit Bhagavad Gita, the song of the Lord Shri Krishna. The many manifestations of Vishnu are worshipped as gods, their stories are often recalled, their images venerated with sacrifice in small temples. The South Indian fire-walking ceremonies and related ordeals associated with the goddess Durga Devi are recurrent spectacles. Some Ashrams and centres of study and prayer follow the way of the Ramakrishna Mission, which promotes the doctrine of the essential unity of all the great world religions and the spiritual monism of the Advaita philosophy of Shankara. These diversities of religious practice are not so important for the main body of Hindus in Fiji as the central conception of God as Ram. The unifying Hindi vernacular of Fiji and the great influence of the singing missionaries whose book was the Ramayan of Tulsi Das have given a special quality to Hinduism in Fiji, linking the whole Indian community of Hindu background today with their forerunners who prayed to Ram as guide during the tribulations of the indenture period.

We have dealt extensively with Hinduism, much less with Islam, the Sikh religion, and Christianity. In any consideration of the meeting of religions in Fiji this seeming imbalance is inevitable. Any future meeting in greater depth between the religions will need to reckon with this reality and be patiently ready to understand the majority faith of Fiji Indian people. Historical treatment at some length has been needed to set the scene for what now follows: a closing consideration of the possibility of dialogue between Fiji's differing, and fascinating, variants on great world religious systems.

Our question is whether favourable conditions have been created in Fiji for encounter in depth, and what is not called dialogue, between these systems.
Let us acknowledge that all four religions, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Sikhism are today missionary religions in that they actively share and promote their belief and practice with non-adherents—the Sikhs, who are a special trained and dedicated brotherhood, less so than the others. Nevertheless, since the lifetime of their founder, Guru Nanak, they too believe they have found a mediating and permanently valid Way.

The constitution of independent Fiji protects religious liberty and acknowledges the existence of God, but stops short of being a specific charter for a theocracy. Within its framework those who believe in God have the opportunity to propagate, maintain, or change their faith, or to have none at all. Tolerance and peaceful encounter thus have the chance to thrive. Up to now the encounter has been of two kinds: promotion of particular doctrines, and finding a lowest common denominator.

The promotion of our own doctrines (and here I speak as a Christian) often proceeds by facing every problem with an open mouth. We all tend to do it. Even when we listen to each other for a little while, we go on almost immediately to use the phrase "yes, but". A traditional missionary approach, whether from a gospel preacher, a pilgrim back from Mecca, a visiting Swami, or a Sikh theologian, has one common result in Fiji; it prevents us from listening to each other carefully and going away to weigh what is said with thought and prayer. Premature preaching stiffens resistance and shuts us up in our own presuppositions. It is opposed to the methods of both science and effective counselling. Its effects are as negative, in many cases, as the outward cultural forms we often seem to think are absolutely essential to true religion. Pipe Organs and pews are not essential to genuine Christianity. A genuine profession of Hinduism can be made without worshipping images. Brahma is pure self and pure spirit.

The first step to true dialogue, as many have found in Asia and Europe in recent years, is closer to the method of research science. To reach inward to the heart of any matter it is necessary to put questions to the mystery, to wait for it to yield its own secrets in its own way, leading to understanding. At world level Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Sikhs and Christians are meeting and listening to each other in this way. Each may first explain itself; the others listen and put their questions and
receive answers. The process may go on for years. I have seen two Christian missionaries, a man and his wife, who spent years in a strongly Muslim part of Indonesia doing nothing but receiving Muslims in their living room day after day, to listen, to learn, and to answer questions if put to them. The approach was described, with examples from meetings, in two books issued by the World Council of Churches in 1971. The Roman Catholic Second Vatican Council also opened the way, in its Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, for such dialogue at a deeper level of respect, silence, and regret for the past.

The other way of meeting, a search for common ground in approach to God and in ethical standards, has already begun in Fiji through the inter-faith acts of worship on public occasions such as the recent Girmi centenary celebrations. They help adherents of widely differing religions to trust and know each other. They are, however, incorrectly called ecumenical. In the true sense of that word, ecumenical, as used widely since 1910, it is important that we should not lose sight of our real differences by using the common ground we have to cover over our distinctiveness. At certain points we converge, at others we have vastly differing understandings of God and of man. If we draw a veil over what we believe, what differing scriptures teach, what we consider important for conduct, we stand in the light of the scientific study of religion and prevent ourselves from knowing more of one another at deeper levels.

Having said which, let us nevertheless conclude with words spoken to me recently in Suva by my honoured acquaintance Bhaiji Dalip Singh Khaur of the Sikh community: "This is a beautiful country, with all these beautiful places, houses, cars and people. But they are really nothing. They are toys. We play with them for a little while. After that there will be a long sleep. So it is important for us to love one another while we are here."

Those words invite us all to transcend the past by the spirit of understanding; for we are all, in this country, members of one race: the human.
FOOTNOTES


4 Ibid., pp. 15-16.

5 Burton, J.W., Our Indian Work in Fiji, Suva, 1909, p. 15.

6 Somerville, I.K., 'Hindus in Fiji', Typescript in author’s possession, deals with Totaram Sanadhya. I am grateful to Mr. Somerville for details and insights arising from his field-work in Fiji.

7 Loc. cit., 8 April 1976, 2. The translation is Somerville's, op. cit.

8 Chaturvedi, Benarsidas, and Sykes, Marjorie, Charles Freer Andrews, London, 1949; the quotation is from Burton, op. cit., p. 33, and is cited by Somerville (t.s. cit.).


13 Sahadeo, Muneshwar (and others), Holy Torture in Fiji, Sydney, 1974.
