

Let's change our narratives - Fiji Times Online



A celebration to mark the end of the observance of Ram Naumi, the birth of Lord Rama. The author says it is almost always easier to remember the pain than to acknowledge the goodness of those around us. Picture: FILE

MAY 19, 2000 has been etched in the memory of many, the day of political and civil unrest in Fiji. This day was the catalyst for my learning journey across my comfort zones, history and the struggles of my ancestors and their hosts on the land we call home.

About 10.30am I received a message, seven gunmen had taken parliament hostage. What we thought would be over in no time continued for 56 days, our parliamentarians were kept hostage and there was rampant looting, burning and violence.

I was managing national rural development programs at an NGO. Well connected to the ground, I received reports of violence around the country. I met those affected and could not believe their stories of pain and trauma. I was angry as I listened to sufferings of my own people.

The indigenous people I spoke with were the ones providing shelter and protection. It was easy to turn a blind eye to the goodness of those who showed compassion. It was easier to remember the violence. It justified my anger and my narrative. People were confused, leaders had made promises of land lease renewal on one hand and were making calls that people of Indian origin wanted to own land on the other.

Farmers told me "we are tenants and just wish to continue to live peacefully as tenants". They kept saying they had good relations with the raja (chief) over the years. There were strong bonds in the communities. If there was a wedding in the family, the raja and family were invited for feasting. So

what went wrong?

For the first time we had a person of Indian origin as the Prime Minister. The government of the day's statements regarding land and resources were considered insensitive to the indigenous people. The disgruntled few who wanted power preached violence that erupted on May 19!

I was invited for a reconciliation initiative of the Ecumenical Centre for Research Education and Advocacy. Fr Frank Hoare, a Catholic priest, was leading a process of peace and healing. I was sceptical yet yearning for longer-term solutions.

I had seen the reconciliation efforts of the government that had taken form of speeches and taralala. People were supposed to forget everything and move on through one day of song and dance, even when their hearts were filled with pain and mistrust.

Though difficult, I was willing to challenge my comfort zone. I went along through various training programs.

There was an attempt to bring people from all sectors that were deeply affected. Often I found myself the only person of Indian origin and only non-Christian in these spaces. Others were invited but did not engage.

There was a two-week dialogue forum in Suva. Members of the disbanded Counter Revolutionary Warfare unit (not involved in the mutiny), counsellors for political prisoners, people from different political views attended. Anger and venting took a week of the process. I was the "enemy's representative" so it was extremely difficult being in the room. At the end of the forum I was told by many it was the first time they had such a dialogue with someone of my origin and listened to our fears and need for belonging.

I was offered a treasured tanoa (to this day I hold it dear) by one of the indigenous participants from Cakaudrove who told me I was just as Fijian as the tanoa! It was an extremely emotional moment having dialogued through to acceptance!

As peace facilitators our first engagement was in Savusavu. Five of us travelled by boat. I was supposed to lead the session on the root causes of the events. There were representatives from disciplinary forces. There was also strong representation from the rebel community.

I was the perceived enemy in the room. I discussed with facilitators that it was not appropriate for me to facilitate, all agreed but I decided to stay in the room the entire five days.

I felt raw pain in the form of anger, representatives of the disciplined forces were angry at rebels for their humiliation, rebels were angry as a number of them were incarcerated, anger against government, anger against people like me who were perceived to be taking over. There were raw emotions. Each day was draining. We could see all the confusion, pain and misunderstandings at play causing so much harm.

We conducted sessions in the Islands, in Suva, West and Macuata.

Macuata had very raw stories of evictions, fear and violence. Those affected felt they did not get justice. The perpetrators were roaming free. Unknown to them the "perpetrators" were picked up and "brought to justice" by disciplinary forces as told to us in our sessions. Both ethnic groups were left in the same communities to deal with pain and confusion of May 2000.

Later I discovered that those who had committed violence took traditional matanigasau and apologised to the tenant communities. Tears were shed and both communities claim now they have a truly deeper bond. I have witnessed at least two villages where tenant farmers have been welcomed and are part of the village council, something that was never heard before!

As part of our training we had stereotype workshops. I grew up listening to negative narratives about indigenous people. I was shocked to find exactly the same stereotypes in the other community. Indigenous children were being scared that the "Indian man" will abduct if one is naughty.

Incidentally, last month when I was shopping at a supermarket I smiled when I heard an iTaukei mother trying to control her toddler by telling the child "Ia, qarauna na yalewa ni Idia". The child stared at me and I smiled back!

How we confuse our children — we teach them to mistrust and then expect them to live and work together!

In trying to make sense of the different stories on this new journey I started looking at our history.

My ancestors were brought to work on farms of the colonials. Early writings from diaries and reports of the British rulers' indicate they hated Indians and were brutal to ensure control. Fijians were fed stereotypes to keep them away from Indians. It helped with the concept of divide and rule. It may also have helped my ancestors transfer their anger and hatred from their rulers to the people of the land, the scapegoats.

Dr William MacGregor, apparently well known for his dislike for Indians, was the one who led the rescue operations of Indian indentured labourers from the wreck of the Syria in 1884. In his report, he recounted that four Fijian villagers helped him.

The rescued were received by the chief of Nasilai with food, water and shelter for the night. Next day some rescued were taken by boats to Nasilai immigration depot, while others walked to Rewa, receiving food and fruit from Fijian men and women along the way.

People of the land had showed kindness to our forefathers in trying to save them and feed them even before they knew who we were. In trying to find our identity we have often overlooked the generosity of the people of the land, fuelled by some politicians and stereotypical narratives we have grown up with.

My grandfather who was brought with false promises like most others did not know he was coming to

Fiji. He tried to go back at the end of his agreement and was told that the boat was full and to wait for another three months. Three months later he still could not get passage so he had no choice but to begin his life here.

Those who could not go back struggled with pain away from their motherland, their families and their heritage.

Indigenous Fijians did not have a choice as my ancestors were dumped on their land and expected to use their sacred resources.

In the narratives of our pain we often have forgotten to express our gratitude to the people of the land. I learned during my painful journey from May 19 that it's easier to remember the pain we suffered then to acknowledge the goodness around us that contribute to our sustenance. It is time for us to look deeper in ourselves.

Anger and hatred will not bind us as a people. A lot has happened in our past, we cannot go back, we can move forward to try and improve our future.

This May 19 I ask all of my heritage as we remember the pain our ancestors have gone through to sustain us, try and reach out and learn about the pain of the descendants of their hosts and let us balance our narrative.

* Sashi Kiran is the founder of an NGO. The views expressed are hers and not of this newspaper.