**The Cannibal Isles**

“Catch the bus at the Nadi markets, but be sure it takes the back road to Lautoka,” Dr. Rajat instructs me over the phone.

Although I’m in Fiji on holiday, I’m invited to attend a workshop on Community Health. Back in New Zealand, I’d heard about free medical camps being held on outlying Fijian islands where villagers had few facilities. Is this my opportunity to find out more?

The back road goes via the coast through Viseisei, where the first settlers of Fiji, cannibals all, made landfall. Our window-free bus allows tropical air to waft over us. I’m set down on the seaward side of the main road beside the village. An impressive bure-style hall of traditional Fijian design perches on a nearby hill.

The workshop is already in session. Dr Rajat quietly installs me at the top table. About forty women are listening to a speaker.

“What’s an NCD?” I whisper to Doctor Rajat, feeling ignorant.

“Non-comunicable disease,” he whispers back, unfazed. “Not infectious. Common diseases like diabetes, hypertension, heart disease. They’re the highest burden to health systems world wide.”

The scene is colourful: tapa-patterned tablecloths against cream floor tiles; a white steep-pitched ceiling. The women, mostly Melanesian, wear bright sulus and tops. Indian ladies wear salwar kameez. The sea breeze fans us all through generous windows and open doors. It’s about 28 degrees Celcius.

The women are community health workers at the grass roots level, dealing with these diseases in dozens of villages. They’ve decorated the walls with hand-written charts on the health status of their villages, the numbers of NCDs. Photographs illustrate activities being undertaken, such as education, exercise, counselling, back yard gardening and composting.

Their poorly paid job, promoting wellness in the villages, is to persuade people to change their habits and reduce the incidence of NCDs.

“Most of our old people die in their sixties or can barely move around,” I’m told. “We don’t have white-haired people like you.” That solved a puzzle for me, as the most common question I’d been asked in Fiji was, ‘How old are you?’

The workshop speakers are from Lautoka, inspiring the health workers to overcome challenges of negativity, suspicion, disbelief, old attitudes and laziness of the villagers.

I discover Dr Rajat is also a professor. This small quiet Indian man impresses me. In tune with these workers, alert to any chance to make a point, he speaks with humour and compassion, yet always guiding them on towards their goal. I could literally feel love emanate from him and his wife, Dr Swaran.

Both are devotees of Indian guru, Sai Baba. He inspired them to open a free medical clinic in Viseisei village, with the blessing and help of the Ministry of Health, complete faith in Sai Baba that their needs would be met and little else. From the clinic, they serve local villages, run community outreach camps in distant villages or, by request, in city factories for the workers.

Slim and ageless in her purple salwar kameez, Dr Swaran is my minder. “My first concern is women’s health,” she tells me. “Let’s have lunch now.”

Women from Viseisei village have brought portable gas rings and set them up on the concrete verandah outside the hall. Vast quantities of food have been prepared; boiled taro, breadfuit and green banana, sliced into chunks, stirfried vegetables and rice, meat on chopped bones, and over it all, a thick ‘soup’ like a sauce, all served in a modern cardboard takeaway container. I have a fork, but others eat with their fingers.

“The soup is what flavours Fijian meals although Indian curry dishes are now a popular choice,” Dr Swaran says. “The two cuisines have blended. Villagers need to cut down on salt in soups, learn to grow a herb garden and use soy sauce or herbs instead for flavour,” she adds. “The Sai Centre is also developing a healthy recipe cookbook.”

We devour slices of local watermelon. “People need to choose water instead of soft drinks,” Dr Swaran sighs.

I’d noticed young men selling 2-litre bottles of cold soft drink outside bus stations through the bus window-space, but they weren’t offering water.

After lunch, another Indian academic speaker emphasises the aims of the day. “We need healthy staff at the Sai clinic. We are the role models,” he informs us. “Even you have to lose weight.”

That brings a few wry smiles. Melanesian women are not small.

“Identify your goals first,” he continues. “Learn to write project reports in an exercise book. We must educate people. Think of sustainability and look at the environment, the settings where you eat – the school, church, home, restaurants, shops. How can you help them provide healthier food?”

“Support each other,” the speaker encourages. “Co-ordinate village health committees.”

“Another intervention that the clinic has set up,” says Dr Swaran afterwards, “is the Young Mother Project for teen mothers. They’re sidelined in the villages. We try to get them back into education.”

It sounds like any small New Zealand town.

Now I want to see Viseisei village. Luisa, an attendee, has time before a village committee meeting. Before I leave, I give the two doctors a gift. I’d been told that towels were expensive in Fiji, so I hand a pair over.

“Oh!” exclaims Dr Swaran. “We were just saying the clinic needs some new towels.” She smiles happily. “This is the way things come to us.”

Luisa and I walk down the hill through the village school, finished for the day, and cross the main road. I am not permitted to wear my hat. Only the chief in a village may wear one.

It’s a model village: neat grounds, pink bouganvillea and banana palms. There’s plenty of grass where kids can play, houses painted and tidy, but, “We get too many cyclones to build expensive houses,” says Luisa in her no-nonsense manner.

Around a central grass square are several historical monuments. We approach one, the area of a generous room. “This is the tomb of the cannibal. All the fighting equipment is buried here,” Luisa points. “Not too close, please.”

Those settlers were fearsome cannibals. One chief was recorded as having eaten over 850 people. Another chief, whose wife ran away, caught her, cut off both her arms and made her watch as they were cooked and eaten. From the mid-1850s, Christianity was accepted in Fiji and cannabalism ceased.

“And this is the memorial to the first missionary,”Luisa continues. “He was very influential. The buttons from his waistcoat, which he gave to the chief, are framed in the church.”

The imposing white-washed church occupies the third side of the square. Luisa proudly shows me around. “We built in concrete after the wooden one was wrecked in a cyclone,” she says. “It’s an unusual design. Our men had returned from the Second World War, and after seeing the classical churches of Greece, modelled the design on them.”

Men and women worship separately and children have their own area. The chief sits alone in an alcove during services, at a lace-clothed table on a mat woven from coconut palm leaves, edged with pink wool decorations, the famous buttons displayed behind him.

On a raised platform of stones on the square’s fourth side stands the traditional bure of the chief, displaying the considerable house-building skills of the villagers. Chiefly status is revered, respected and obeyed and the village social system clearly defined.

Across the road, village women have opened a shop for healthier choices. Kids are snacking on local fruit after school.

A few days later, after church and cake-laden feast for morning tea, I was to observe a growing health problem in Fiji. A group of men set up a grog (kava) drinking group in the church hall. Grog is not alcoholic but is addictive. It’s a social thing, like drinking wine or beer, but it’s an expensive habit. ‘I’d rather stay at home and drink grog than go out,’ a young woman confessed to me**.**

It’s not in the resorts where I find the real Fiji. That’s in the towns and rural villages. People mostly live simple, happy and spiritual lives, subsistence farming on the rich red soil. Sugarcane is the main crop. When I visit in September, harvesting is in full swing. Toy-like trains haul endless lines of wagons to the sugar mill. Battered trucks and tractors stagger under heavy loads. Loose canes litter the roadsides and the scent of molasses hangs in the humid air.

On the homeward journey, the only white person in the bus amongst the dark-skinned passengers, I reflect that we all have the same needs. Fijians merely have a different way of meeting them, one that suits their style - laid back, and with faith that God, of whatever religion, has things firmly in control.