

New Zealand Indian Diaspora Convention Speech by Sir Anand Satyanand at Auckland
University of Technology on 26 July 2014

NZIRI Director Professor Sekhar Bandyopadhyay; AUT Deputy Dean Kate Kearins; Honourable Judith Collins, Member of Parliament and Minister for Ethnic Affairs; Excellency Mr Ravi Thapar, High Commissioner for India to New Zealand; Professor Edwina Pio, also of the NZIRI, Ladies and Gentlemen. Namaste, Namashkar, Kem cho, Salaam Walaikum, Kia Ora.

I want to add congratulations to all those who have contrived this important occasion today for people with a defined community of interest to gather and talk from a variety of standpoints. I have had the benefit of discussing with Professor Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, how I might structure my introductory remarks. It was during this exchange that the idea was canvassed that I should approach my part as though I was an orator on a New Zealand marae and making a speech on what is called the paepae, the area of ground in front of the meeting house or wharenui where speeches are delivered on important occasions.

In that setting, the custom is for the speaker to recite their genealogy, to add something of substance with regard to the purpose of the meeting and to finish with a wero or challenge about some future event or occasion.

With that in my mind, may I first recite, as a proud New Zealander, the fact that my four grandparents were born and raised in India two in Uttar Pradesh in a place not too distant from Allahabad, and two from further south in what today is called Andhra Pradesh. All four people, at different times and in different modes, migrated from India to Fiji under the indentured labour scheme to make a new life in the Pacific. On the maternal side they worked as girmitya in sugar plantations beginning in 1882 and on the paternal side my father's father worked in the government service as an interpreter from Telegu, Malayalam and Tamil into English in the courts and later a variety of government organisations. In due time, their children - my parents came to New Zealand for school and University in my father's case. It's a long story not all able to be told today but they were granted permanent residence and remained in New Zealand where I was born and brought up in a family of two children. In that upbringing I was encouraged to maintain my linkages with relations in Fiji and places to which they have migrated. I have relations who are Fiji Indians, who are Samoans, who are United States, Australian and Canadian citizens. All of them retain the linkage. My wife and I have encouraged our children to be proud of all of their background including the Indian. As with all cultural linkage, such can take the form of interest in and use of language, music, dance or food. It can even involve the pursuit of travel to access

and enjoy matters of cultural heritage. The extent to which precise items are retained – for example the ability to listen to and speak in one of more of the 16 languages of India will vary. The important thing is to find opportunities to discuss how this may be furthered.

Such an opportunity occurred within India at the beginning of the present century when leaders in the government of India decided that a time had come when a different approach could be taken to those living outside India. A study of overseas Indians was completed by a senior civil servant and jurist, whose name is well known – Laxmi Mall Singhvi, who passed away in 2007 at the age of 76. He is a man who conducted many of India's affairs to do with law, diplomacy and administration with distinction. He headed a committee which provided a report on the number and placement in the community of people of Indian origin living around the world. They numbered more than 25 million and constituted a group with whom the modern India might do well with by encouragement of investment, tourism and cultural exchange. Thus began the notion of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, the event celebrating the fact of Indian origin and anchored each year on 9 January the day in 1915 that the Mahatma-ji returned from South Africa to India to take part in the civil society movement that would see the end of India being a colony of Britain but an independent country in its own right.

The Pravasi has been a successful venture repeated each year, and under the stewardship of different governments – BJP and Congress - when thousands of people of Indian origin have gone to India to meet others of a similar background and to rejoice in their cultural bonds. This is so even though the way in which people undertake their contemporary lives or approaches to their Indian heritage may be very different. This has been put in many ways but none better perhaps than by Sir Sridath (Sonny) Ramphal, erstwhile Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, who described Indian cultural heritage, in his own instance as being like a seed from a tree growing in India being taken across the seas and growing with encouragement from a seed again to flower in the Caribbean – being different but maintaining the essence of Indian origin.

My whaikorero has thus been about what it may mean to be a person of Indian origin. I end with a challenge or wero which is addressed to us all. What are we to do with the matter of our Indian heritage? It is there to be accessed and enjoyed and shared with others. The challenge is may I suggest not to just record it or bottle it up but to share it and to enjoy it – to the consequent benefit of a considerable number. I now very much look forward to listening to the four sessions which will follow. Thank you for your courteous attention.