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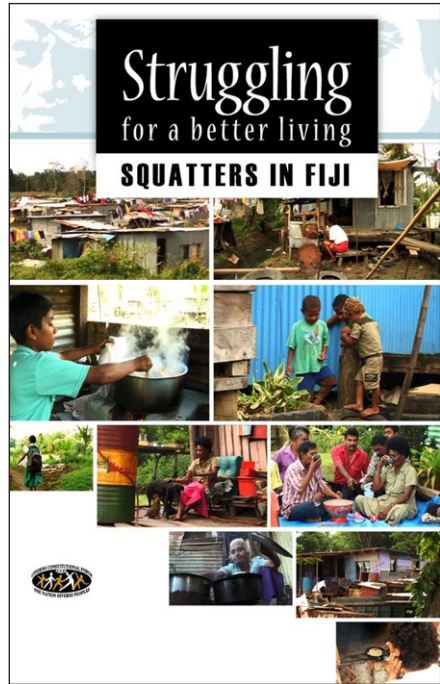
## Powerful Fiji doco shocks on urban poverty

***Struggling for a Better Living: Squatters in Fiji***, directed by Larry Thomas. Suva: Citizens Constitutional Forum with the Ecumenical Centre for Education, Research and Advocacy, 2007. 55min. Distributed by the University of the South Pacific Book Centre.

**F**IJI'S squatter population was on the receiving end of some uncomplicated complimentary comments during 2006. The then State Minister for Housing, Adi Asenaca Caucau, likened them to 'thieves because they lived illegally on someone else's land'. She urged police to make 'every effort to round up and remove' them.

Reporters in Fiji are guaranteed a lively quote or two when Caucau opens her mouth. She once likened Indo-Fijians to weeds taking up too much space. She was only repeating what a Methodist Church minister told her, she explained later.

The media had a field day reporting her comments about squatters, and the melee that ensued. In the



face of Caucau's commanding presence, and with opposition politicians making the most of the opportunity to engage in point scoring, the people at the centre of the controversy—the squatters—were all but forgotten.

Few, if any media, saw fit to test Caucau's statements by actually talking to the squatters.

Given all the hostility and negativity displayed towards squatters, a new video documentary giving them a voice is timely, to say the least. Commissioned by the Suva-based Citizens' Constitutional Forum with support from the Ecumenical

Centre for Education, Research and Advocacy, *Struggling for a Better Living: Squatters in Fiji*, was directed by playwright and filmmaker Larry Thomas.

Thomas, coordinator of the Regional Media Centre at the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) in Suva, has a string of notable documentaries to his name. This latest effort is yet another one of his outstanding achievements. In technical terms, the video is professionally done with good graphics, clear sound, audible voices and eye-catching footage.

Characteristically, Thomas lets his subjects tell their stories. The result is a stirring account of not just the despair and daily struggles that are part and parcel of life in squatter settlements, but also of the resilience of the residents.

The documentary brings a semblance of balance to the squatter issue given that the voices of the squatters were drowned out by the elite and influential sources to which the news media are impulsively drawn to. The figures revealed in the documentary are grim:

- About 12.5 percent of Fiji's 850,000 population now live as squatters.
- There are more than 182 squatter settlements around the country.

- The greater Suva area has the highest concentration, with the squatter population
- having doubled between 1999-2005.

A large portion of the increase is due to the expiry of 5661 land leases, affecting 28,300 households.

Thomas and his team visited camps around Suva, Labasa and Ba. Their camerawork does a superb job in bringing into full view the appalling conditions in these settlements. Flimsy tin shacks, fetid creeks, old tires, rotting drums, abandoned boats, barefoot children in ragged clothes and scrawny dogs make up the dismal and gloomy landscape.

By showing the camps in all their nakedness, the documentary casts grave doubts on the incredulous claims made in a government report in 2005 that 60 percent of Fiji's squatters could afford their own homes. One telling scene in the documentary has an elderly woman bent over an open fire, inhaling the smoke as she prepares a meal for her and her husband.

The number of old people slogging away in these settlements is testimony of the failure of the state and of society to provide for its aged population. From the testimonies of the characters, it is clear that one of the root causes of the problem is low wages.

Says Peter Matayawa of Jittu Estate:

Though we work, there is a huge gap between what we earn and the cost of living. And the rent demanded these days is just impossible.

The documentary raises serious questions about the commitment of successive governments to tackle the problem. It was well known that thousands of cane leases on native land would be expiring, leaving thousands of mainly Indian families who depended on the land for their survival, destitute. But little was done in preparation for this.

Today, a significant proportion of displaced cane farmers make up the squatter population. Often governments plead a lack of money to deal with the problem. But the Qarase government deposed in the December 2006 coup was able to conjure up \$US270,000 for the visit of Prince Charles in 2005 and spent another \$US1.5 million on an international conference the same year. To this day, government funding falls well short of the \$5 million a year needed for the next ten years to accommodate existing squatters and to make provision for new resettlement sub-divisions.

Thomas' documentary also brings home the inadequacy of media coverage of poverty. More so when the

media can play a far more powerful role in influencing public opinion and through it, government policy.

Journalist Kamala Sarup (2005), who specialises in writing on development, says poverty reduction will succeed only by elaborate campaigns through media. **As she points out, the media is always needed for leading the social movement because strong media is the foundation of development and creation of a just and equitable society.**

Sarup also has a message for academics and welfare reformists who must spend more time and money using the media to change attitudes toward poverty instead of writing about it in obscure academic journals. Further highlighting the potential of the media to inform, influence and effect change, she adds:

It is necessary to remind people through media that reducing poverty results in less dangerous and costly criminality, and more productive workers and citizens; in other words, the rich amply benefit by helping the poor. The media is the most effective means (of changing public attitudes) about poverty, and through them, the attitudes of government policy and lawmakers who fund welfare projects.

Sadly, this opportunity was missed

in Fiji. Thomas has made a powerful documentary and many who watched it during an official launch at the University of the South Pacific were visibly moved. However, many in Fiji did not get to see the documentary because Fiji One refused to broadcast it during prime time unless it was paid for the time.

## Reference

Sarup, K. (2006, April 8). Reduce poverty through media, *American Chronicle*. Retrieved on 13 September 2007 from: [www.americanchronicle.com/articles/viewArticle.asp?articleID=7852](http://www.americanchronicle.com/articles/viewArticle.asp?articleID=7852)



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## Sacred Waters

The Australian Centre for Independent Journalism publishes a range of books. Our latest is Dianne Johnson's ***Sacred Waters: The Story of the Blue Mountains Gully Traditional Owners***.

Written in collaboration with the Gundungurra and Darug people of outer Sydney, the book documents their stories, before and after white settlement. Through their story, the story of Sydney is also traced.

Sacred Waters usurps assumptions about the history of Aboriginal people living in the cities and larger towns of Australia. Sacred Waters shows that Aboriginal people living in Sydney have not come here from other parts of Australia - and that the Indigenous connection with the land operates still in even the most populous parts of Australia.

Other books include Peter Manning's *Dog Whistle Politics* and *Journalism and Careers in Journalism* by Fran Molloy and Helena Janson.

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