EMERGING LEADERS

FOR THE DIGITAL WORLD

EXTRACT

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Sam Goundar from Fiji is working to develop awareness of Internet governance issues

I am an academic and have been teaching at universities for the past fifteen years. I have also worked in the IT industry as a data entry operator, computer operations supervisor, and IT manager in private organisations, as well as in government ministries. I have also taught in commercial schools and secondary schools.

My introduction to 'Computers,' as IT was known then, was not my choice. After finishing secondary school, I couldn't afford to go to university, as my marks were not good enough to get a scholarship. My mother, who was working as a housemaid, earned just enough to sustain the two of us. My two elder brothers were married with families of their own. Since I could not afford to pay the university tuition fee, I accepted it as my fate not to go to university and started looking for full-time jobs to assist my mother. For the next two years, my search for a full-

time job was unsuccessful. Instead, I took on odd jobs, like cutting grass, farm work, and for a while laboured for a construction company.

At this time, I played soccer for the local district team. One of my teammates was going to enrol in a computer course at our local university (computer courses were becoming very popular at that time), and I joined him. I had saved enough money to pay the year's tuition fee to complete a Certificate course in Applied Computing.

My career in academia was accidental as well. There was a military coup in my country, and many of the qualified teachers migrated overseas. The university was closed, and when the schools reopened, there was a shortage of teachers. Non-graduates were given the opportunity to teach. I was a semester away from graduating with my Certificate in Applied Computing. I applied

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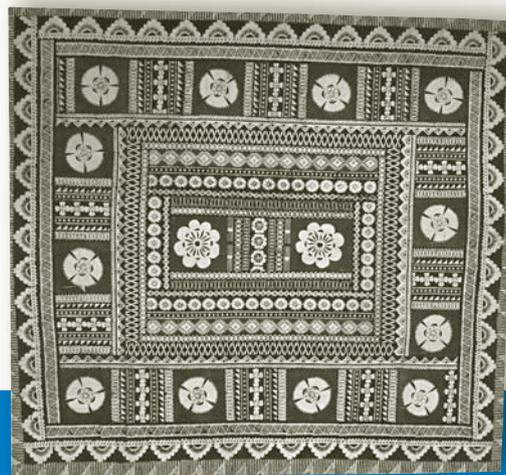
for a teaching position and was appointed to teach in a commercial school. I was on top of the world because, although I would only be paid half of what a fully qualified teacher was paid, teachers are regarded very highly and command great respect in my country. At the age of 18 I was a newly appointed computer teacher and went to teach my first class. I was very nervous, as I had not received any teacher training. As I went inside the classroom, I panicked because all the students were much older than I was. The students were equally bewildered when I told them that I was going to be their new computer teacher. I could sense their disbelief as they tried to ascertain how and what they could learn from someone so much younger than them. I knew that I needed to make an impression and take control straight away or risk losing it all. I can still remember the moment when I started that class with 'What is a computer?'

The son of determined parents

I am from Fiji, a tiny group of islands in the South Pacific. I am a Fijian of Indian descent, and I am very proud of my unique ancestry and roots. My great-grandfather was bought as a slave in South India and forcefully shipped to Fiji to work on the sugarcane farms. The British government at that time ruled over India and Fiji. The natives of Fiji, known as 'kaiviti,' had no knowledge of sugarcane farming, while the Indians from India had been successfully used as sugarcane

farm slaves in South Africa and the Caribbean. My great-grandfather was 18 years old when he was taken aboard a ship travelling to Fiji around 1900.

After the indenture system ended in Fiji around 1930 and slavery ended, my great-grandfather was a free man but with no money to pay his way back home to South India. He continued working as a labourer until he could collect enough money to buy his own piece of land in western Viti Levu. Viti Levu is the biggest island in Fiji. My grandfather was born in the north western town of Rakiraki

in Fiji, and my father was born there as well. My father was a cane farmer, farming my grandfather's land. I have done my share of cane farm work as well and continue to do so today, as part of my traditional obligation whenever I visit my relatives who are still cane farmers.

At some point, my father decided to do something different and ended up cutting copra (dried coconut) on the island of Taveuni (Fiji's third-largest island). That's where he met my mother, on the coconut plantation. My father, who was a very fast and skilful copra

cutter, used to help my mother complete her quota (they were paid according to the number of sacks of copra they had cut at the end of the day), and the helper became the husband.

My mother gave birth to three boys while working full-time as a copra cutter. I was the youngest. Because we didn't own a piece of land, or have a house of our own, the Fijian village of Waimaqera allowed us to build a shack to live in, and that's where I spent the most memorable six years of my life. When the time came for me to start school, my mother decided that we should move to the capital city, Suva, as she saw education as our salvation from poverty.

We moved to Suva, and my father started driving a taxi for our living. Again, we squatted on land near the outskirts of the city in a lean-to house with no water and electricity. I started attending school. In my first year of school, my father passed away after suffering a heart attack. My mother started working as a housemaid to support and educate us. I studied up to sixth form – year 12 equivalent.

Part-time student, full-time teacher

I have only spent one semester as a full-time student. After that, I completed a Certificate in Applied Computing, a Diploma in Computing, and a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Computing Science and Information Systems. All these

qualifications were completed while I was working full-time as a computer teacher and studying part-time or through the University of the South Pacific's Distance and Flexible Learning (DFL) mode.

In 1996, I joined the University of the South Pacific's Fiji Centre as a computer tutor. Once I joined the University, I realised the value of educational qualifications and the importance of becoming a University academic. While tutoring at the University, I completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching, a Postgraduate Diploma in Management, and a Master's of Business Administration. In 2007, I started on a PhD, focusing on e-government in Fiji. I have continued writing my research thesis even though I have left the university. In 2009, I moved to New Zealand to teach at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic and continue my PhD with a New Zealand university. I hope to submit my PhD thesis by the end of this year.

An inspirational role model

Since then, I have published 12 research papers and presented my research on e-government in Fiji and have lately presented my paper on cloud computing at more than 12 international conferences. At the moment, my research focus is on using mobile devices in education. My research has taken me to countries, like the Solomon Islands (2007), Samoa (2007), India (2008), Thailand (2008), New Zealand (2008), Malaysia (2009), Hong Kong (2011), and Indonesia (2011).

I love my academic career, as it does not confine me to the routine of an 8-5 office job. I count my success by the number of students that successfully learn from me and advance in their lives. Many of my students have completed their PhDs and are respected academics at their own universities. Whenever I meet former students and they tell me that I inspired them as a role model, I feel that my mission in life has been
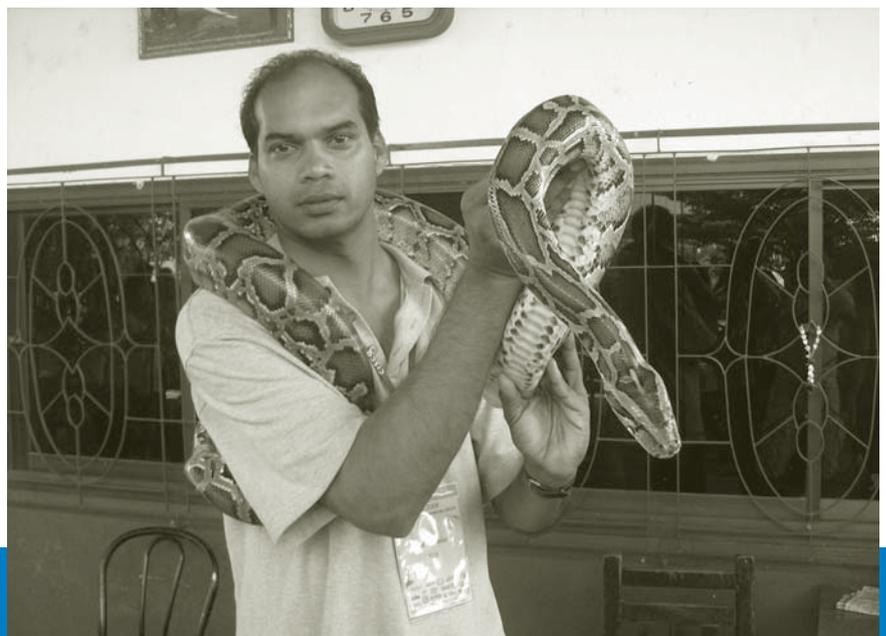
accomplished. My mission was to change at least one life, but with my profession I change and influence hundreds of students every year.

Once I complete my PhD, I intend to apply to teach at universities in developing countries with a three-year tenure in each country until I reach 60. I hope to live that long because that's when I am going back home to the same tiny island that made me what I am today – where I can live to the end of my days and contribute towards my country in whatever way I can.

Fiji and IT: one size doesn't necessarily fit all

While employers and tertiary institutions have been providing Internet access to their employees for the last 10–12 years, the majority of Fijians have only been able to afford Internet access at home within the last five or six years when the telecommunications industry was deregulated and ISP packages became affordable.

As many people are still coming to terms with the technology and learning how to use and access the Internet, not much thought has been given to Internet governance (IG).

I was privileged to get Internet access in 1996, when I started teaching at the University of the South Pacific. After some time, I started deliberating with others on the issue of IG and attended forums on IG and ICANN meetings. I have also been a member of the Pacific Chapter of the ISOC (PICISOC) since 2006 and have regularly attended their annual conferences.

We have now formed a Pacific Internet Governance Forum, as we feel that some issues are unique to the Pacific Islands and one-size-fits-all policies cannot be applied to our tiny, remote, and Internet-connectivity-deprived nations. Fiji is being introduced to IG at the moment, and a few amongst us are developing awareness amongst the rest of the countries about IG issues.

Building IG capacity

As an Internet user and an Internet teacher, IG issues have been an integral part of my life. Meetings, fellowships, and conferences are part of my learning and teaching process on IG. The most positive outcome of the Internet Governance Capacity Building Programme (IGCBP) for me was being able to pass on the knowledge I learned to my students and making them aware of IG issues. In addition, I have started a 'snowball' effect that will see the flow of knowledge about IG issues to the entire country and region. I have insisted that my students speak about IG issues to their parents, siblings, friends, and families.

Professionally and personally, I have benefitted a lot from the IGCBP. I am now able to better advise my students, friends, and family about the importance of IG and other related issues, as almost everyone nowadays is using social media websites, like Facebook, to keep in touch, as well as for entertainment. The knowledge gained from the IGCBP has made me a better and more knowledgeable academic, as I am better able to relate to the issues when addressing questions from my students. Professionally, the programme has enabled me to look at my PhD research from the IG perspective as well.

Fijian Sam Goundar teaches in New Zealand at the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic while he researches his PhD on e-government in Fiji. ■

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiji