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**Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Public Service, Peoples Charter for Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF BA CIVIC MUSEUM AND**

**75TH ANNIVERSARY OF BA TOWN COUNCIL**

**Na Marama Na Tui Ba,**

**The Special Administrator of Ba and the staff of the Ba Town Council,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m delighted to be back in Ba 75 years to the day since the official proclamation of Ba as a township on April the 11th, 1939.

It is a truly historic day and an honour for me as Prime Minister to be with you all to launch the 75th Anniversary celebration of this great town.

I came through Ba as a private citizen early this week on my blue bus gathering the signatures I need to register my proposed political party – the proposed ***Fiji First***. As per the law we of course are not allowed to campaign for the forthcoming election until the proposed ***Fiji First*** is registered. But I would just like to say how touched I was by the welcome I received all over the West and how much I enjoyed meeting so many of my fellow Fijians face-to-face.

But, Ba toh Ba hai! Ba is Ba!

Ba for all of you, its citizens, always was and always will be in your hearts and minds, by far the best place in Fiji. The citizens of Ba are well known and admired for their loyalty to and pride in their town. This pride and loyalty is probably unmatched in Fiji.

And today, every Fijian joins you in celebrating your anniversary and commemorating the contribution Ba has made and is making to our nation and its development.

Today is a day to reflect on the past and I’m especially delighted to be here to officially open the Ba Civic Museum. This is where the story of Ba is told through the various exhibits, the history of Ba comes alive.

Those exhibits include a replica of the seal used by the then Governor of Fiji, Sir Harry Luke, to officially proclaim Ba a township. We can only imagine what a momentous day that was – April the 11th, 1939 – just five months before the outbreak of World War Two.

Fiji, of course, was a British colony and Ba was already a thriving centre of the Sugar Cane Industry run at the time by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Australia.

That Industry was naturally a magnet for people seeking jobs and a better life. And around the Sugar Industry grew a commercial centre to service the growing population – the germ of the thriving township Ba has become today.

The Ba Civic Museum provides us with a window into the past and I urge everyone, and especially our young people, to learn more about the story of Ba by visiting this place. I also hope that other cities and towns in Fiji consider setting up the same kind of facility to tell their own stories. Because engendering a sense of civic pride is no less important than instilling a sense of national pride.

People need to feel a sense of belonging wherever they live, a town, a big city or a nation. And part of that sense of belonging comes from knowing the story of where one lives and learning more about the lives of those who came before.

As we all know, Ba has had its setbacks, especially some devastating floods over the years. The most recent - in 2012 - saw the entire town submerged. But one of the great things about Ba is the *“never say die”* spirit of its people and their determination to bounce back. Its strong sense of community.

Ba Toh Ba Hai! Ba is Ba!

A place where people are fiercely proud and have a can-do attitude. Certainly for a relatively small place, Ba has always had a big influence on our nation’s affairs, whether it’s as the Soccer Kings of Fiji or the dozens of sons and daughters of Ba who occupy leadership roles at every level across Fiji.

There are certainly far too many to individually acknowledge. Of course many of the biggest commercial houses in Fiji have also sprung from humble origins in Ba. All of them job creators, wealth creators, investors and vital contributors to our economy and the prosperity of our nation.

So today is a day for honouring Ba’s past, to look back with pride on 75 years of civic progress. I also want to acknowledge the tens of thousands of ordinary Fijians over the years whose sweat and toil has built this town and built our nation. I especially want to pay tribute to those in the Sugar Cane Industry – the farmers, the cane cutters, the mill workers – all those who have contributed to this vital sector of our national economy.

And I want to single out one family as I turn our attention from the past to the future, and the vision I have for this town and this nation in the years ahead.

This has been a big week for the Chand family of Ba as their son, Ravinesh, graduates from the University of the South Pacific. On Wednesday night, Ravinesh received a Gold Medal from His Majesty the King of Tonga for being the most outstanding graduate with a major in Education plus the Vice Chancellor’s prize for the best combined academic performance and all round service to the community.

Truly, a son of Ba to make us all proud. But all the more so because of the emotional tribute Ravinesh Chand paid to his parents for encouraging him to fulfill his dreams.

They aren’t from one of the rich families of Ba. They are from one of the poorest. Ravinesh’s father is a cane cutter. And we can only imagine the sacrifices they have made over the years – all their hard work - to produce this outstanding result.

I would have liked Ravinesh to be here today in his home town to receive the acclaim he so thoroughly deserves. Unfortunately, he has had to attend a graduation function in Suva. But I’m telling you his story because he not only deserves to be regarded as a hero in Ba. He is an inspiration to every young Fijian. A symbol of what anyone can become if they work hard enough. A symbol of our potential to become a clever country.

As I keep saying at schools around the nation. I want the young people of Fiji to dream big dreams. To take advantage of the free schooling they have now been given. To take advantage of the tertiary loans they can now receive or the full scholarships for the top 600 students. They too can be like Ravinesh Chand. Like him, they can overcome the challenges of a poor background and achieve outstanding success. And as a nation, we need to give them all the assistance we can.

As I also keep saying. This is a great time to be a Fijian,

greater than at any other time in our history. We have embarked on a new journey and in a new direction as one nation, one people. And by working together and putting Fiji first, our nation first, I am convinced that we can truly make Fiji great. That we can finally fulfill our destiny and genuinely make Fiji the way the world should be, rather than just an empty slogan.

All around us, there is hard evidence that our economy is growing and business confidence and investment is on the rise. You don’t have to take my word for it. Just this week, one of the world’s most rigorous economic examiners, Moody’s Investors Service, has given Fiji a big tick.

Moody’s said the Fijian economy is experiencing robust growth on the back of an upturn in business confidence and investment. And it said the Government’s fiscal and debt consolidation has bolstered Fiji’s credit worthiness.

So here is one of the toughest economic analysts in the world expressing confidence in Fiji and acknowledging our economic growth forecast.

As I say, it is a great time to be Fijian. And also a great time to live in Ba - a town with a wonderful history and an even better future.

75 years on, we have much to celebrate. And with those words, I have great pleasure in declaring the new Ba Civic Museum open.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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