

## Twice migrants' relationship to their ancestral homeland

### *The case of Indo-Fijians and India*

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#### **Abstract**

This article investigates the relationships of Indo-Fijians to their ancestral homeland, both in Fiji and following their secondary migration to Australia. Most Indo-Fijians are descendants of indentured labourers to Fiji. The majority have long ago lost all personal contacts with India. During their stay in Fiji, their social, cultural and religious practices have undergone many changes. Their experiences with subcontinental Indians are limited and their views of India and of subcontinental Indians largely based on ignorance, indifference and stereotypes. Recent efforts of the Indian Government at fostering relations with its 20 million strong diaspora are aimed primarily at wealthy Indian migrants in the West and descendants of indentured Indians have attracted comparatively little interest in India. Many Indo-Fijians have left Fiji and resettled in the developed Pacific Rim countries, especially Australia. In the wake of this secondary migration, Indo-Fijians have realised that their social and cultural distance from subcontinental Indians is too great to be narrowed by a shared ethnicity. In the process, they have developed a Pacific identity.

#### **Keywords**

Fiji Indians; Indian diaspora

first from India to Fiji and later from Fiji to developed countries of the Pacific Rim. This is followed by a brief discussion of the changes that their social, cultural and religious practices underwent during their stay in Fiji, which are at the root of their estrangement from subcontinental Indians. The official, personal and imaginary relationships between Indo-Fijians in Fiji with India are explored next, followed by an analysis of the changes that this relationship has undergone following their secondary migration.

### **The two-step migration history**

Over the last one-and-a-half centuries, many Indo-Fijian families have undertaken two migrations, the first, from India to Fiji, occurring in colonial times. A few generations later, many families undertook a secondary migration to Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada. The historical circumstances of these two migrations were very different.

The Indian presence in Fiji was first and foremost a product of the imperial connection, a part of a system of indentured migration from India to many plantation colonies, introduced in response to labour shortages following the abolition of slavery in 1834. In this context, details of the indentured labour trade into Fiji between 1879 and 1916 have been delineated by extensive research and publication so there is no need to rehearse them here.<sup>3</sup> Two points can be highlighted. First, it was a matter of colonial government policy, overtly concerned with preserving traditional Fijian culture, to keep ethnic Fijians away from the wage labour and plantation systems of sugarcane production, so that from the start, the migrant community was held apart. Secondly, though the working and living conditions under indenture were appalling enough for the Indians to call them *narak* (hell), at least if indentured workers spent another five years in the colony they were entitled to a free return passage. However, '[f]or the later history of Fiji the most important provision in the scheme was that immigrants could, if they wished, remain in Fiji after completing their indentured labour service' (Gillion 1962: 16). This provision laid the foundation for a permanent Indian presence in Fiji.

On the day they left home, most indentured Indians severed for good all contacts with their relations in India (Gillion 1962: 127). In the sailing ship era of the late nineteenth century, a voyage between India and Fiji took some 40 days and even after the introduction of steamships, few indentured labourers

of free migrants in the 1920s, led to the emergence of an Indo-Fijian professional and business class. In colonial times, Indo-Fijians also filled the higher echelons of the civil service. On the other hand, ethnic Fijians were over-represented in the army and police force and their movement to urban areas was restricted. A contemporary legacy of colonial rule in Fiji is the continuing record of manipulation of ethnicity by members of the political élite, of all ethnic groups. This, ultimately, is the root of the Indo-Fijians' predicament in postcolonial Fiji.

Since Fiji's independence in 1970, race relations have dominated Fiji politics. In 1987 and again in 2000, Indo-Fijian dominated governments were removed in coups and since 2000 Indo-Fijians have largely been excluded from political power. Within Fiji's economy, the roles of Indo-Fijians and ethnic Fijians have remained different. While the diversification into trade, commerce, industry and the professions had already started in colonial times, about half of the Indo-Fijians are still farmers or working in agriculture and today, their situation is grave. Large numbers of Indo-Fijian farmers have had to leave their farms, exacerbating social problems such as rural–urban drift and poverty.<sup>4</sup>

The political and economic situation in postcolonial Fiji, the lure of a higher degree of security and a higher standard of living abroad, and facilitation by their transnational kinship networks, have caused an estimated 150,000 Indo-Fijians to undertake a secondary migration (Vijay Naidu, pers. comm., May 2001). The vast majority have resettled in the developed countries of the Pacific Rim—Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada—India having had no relevance to their plans. Being geographically closest, Australia and New Zealand are particularly important for resettlement: Australia today hosts the largest overseas community of Indo-Fijians, estimated at some 40,000 at the turn of the millennium (Voigt-Graf 2003). Most emigrants, though, remain attached to Fiji. Fiji is the place of their childhood memories, fondly remembered as a beautiful country offering a relaxed lifestyle. Many migrants have close kin in Fiji, further strengthening their emotional links. For many of them, Fiji is the place to which they would like to return, if it offered more political security and better economic opportunities. Being resettled close to it is a partial consolation, allowing the opportunity for regular visits.

becoming the essence (Voigt-Graf 2002b: 502–03). From the plurality of Hindu practices in India, Indo-Fijians have chosen those that made most sense to them in their social and economic situation. The *Ramayana* became the most popular text not only because it is simple and casteless but more importantly because its central theme is exile, suffering, struggle and eventual return. In the barracks of the indentured workers, *Ramayana* was recited and *Ram Lila* performances staged (ibid.). Indo-Fijians incorporated elements of other cultures into their daily life. The widespread consumption of kava (the traditional, ritual and now social drink in Fiji) in daily life in Indo-Fijian households is one of the most obvious examples. Moreover, the shared experiences of Indo-Fijians during and after indenture have led to the emergence of an encompassing Indo-Fijian identity regardless of the religious, linguistic and cultural differences among them. As a consequence, most respondents in Fiji felt that relations between Indo-Fijians of various backgrounds were amicable, sometimes stressing that marriages between partners of different religions or regional origins were fairly common. Bindu Sharma, wife of a Hindu priest, explains the situation in respect to inter-religious marriages:

There is real good unity between the religious groups here in Fiji. During indenture, our ancestors all suffered together and people realised that they had to unite against the bosses if they were to reach anything. Since that time, there is good co-operation between Hindus and Muslims. I know a lot of Hindus who are married to Muslims. Basically we are all the same and that is how we treat each other.

This is very different from the situation in India, where identities adhere to the narrow confines of language, caste and sect.

To say that many aspects of their lives have changed over the decades is not to overlook that Indo-Fijians have successfully retained many parts of their ancestral culture. This can mostly be attributed to two factors: ongoing migration from India and the establishment of cultural and religious associations. The constant stream of new arrivals from India helped to sustain and revive parts of Indian culture. Up to 1917, new indentured migrants arrived every year with a baggage of cultural practices, thereby refreshing the knowledge of those who had been living in Fiji for some time. In the early 1900s, free migrants started coming to Fiji. Most were traders from Gujarat who could

the subcontinent again, India remained their sacred homeland and the primary source of their culture (Chauhan 1969; pers. comm., 19 April 2004).

### **The relationship of Indo-Fijians in Fiji to India**

#### *Official relations to the Indian Government*

In the past, the attitude of the Indian government towards its diaspora has at times given every appearance of ambivalence. Within the last two decades, however, its relationship with parts of its global diaspora has become closer, since the Indian government has realised the potential benefits of enhanced economic co-operation. Nevertheless, relations with Indo-Fijians and other Indians of indentured origin are not a high priority.

Historically, for almost 50 years after the beginning of indentured migration in 1834 neither the colonial government of India nor the general population had been particularly concerned about the maltreatment of Indian indentured workers abroad. Only Gandhi's agitation and threat of a nationwide *satyagraha* (passive resistance) led to a stop to recruitment in 1917 (Ray 1993: 283).<sup>9</sup> In 1920, the colonial government of India asked all colonies to terminate the indenture system. Once indenture was abolished, though, the mainstream of Indian national politics lost interest in the Indian diaspora.

After 1947, independent India, regarding herself as in the avant-garde of Third World nationalism, was more concerned about her relations with the emergent postcolonial states than with the fate of Indians in other British colonies. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, held that the question of overseas Indians was an integral part of the colonial liberation and that their separate identity would merge into a wider Third World solidarity (Nehru 1961). This, of course, did not happen. It was precisely in some postcolonial states, such as Fiji, that the situation of overseas Indians was worst, because they were seen as an unwelcome residue of colonialism rather than as victims who had also suffered from the system.

The issue of Indians abroad again entered the political agenda in the 1970s when India started to receive vast amounts of remittances as a result of labour migration from India to the oil-rich Gulf countries. As a result, the Indian Government started to pay attention to its overseas diaspora and to formulate policies to regulate their relationship with India. Even though these policies

of writing, modalities were being worked out and the law had not yet been implemented (Chauhan pers. comm., 19 April 2004). The High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora also proposed that the Indian government hold annual celebrations in honour of the Indian diaspora. These *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* have been organised in January 2003 and January 2004 in Delhi to recognise the diaspora's achievements and ensure its sustained interaction with India. Each year they have attracted some 2,000 participants from various corners of the Indian diaspora.

The success of the Indian government's initiatives at establishing meaningful and reliable economic links with the diaspora has varied. NRI bank accounts are very popular among overseas Indians because the bank accounts allow them to keep foreign exchange in India on which they draw when visiting India. India receives a larger amount of monetary remittances than any other country (Vertovec 1993). Industrial investments, however, have remained below expectations.

The Indian government's efforts at fostering co-operation with the diaspora have to a large extent targeted wealthy Indian migrants in the developed countries who have money to spare for investments in India. Descendants of indentured Indians, because of their less favourable socioeconomic status, have attracted comparatively little interest in India. On their own behalf, few descendants of indentured Indians have established economic links to India. None of the Indo-Fijian respondents in Sydney or Fiji had, for instance, taken advantage of any Indian government regulations for overseas Indians. Rather, as they have made clear to members of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora, their expectations are to receive political and other support from the Indian government. They expect India to put pressure on the Fiji government to give up what they regard as discriminatory policies towards Indo-Fijians and to help educate young Indo-Fijians so that they would become eligible to migrate to developed countries (Ministry of External Affairs 2004). Nor is this the first time that Indo-Fijians have looked to India for support. For instance, many Indo-Fijians eagerly awaited the re-opening of India's High Commission in Fiji in 1999, hoping for closer contacts between Fiji and India. Some respondents pointed out that the re-opening would make them feel safer in Fiji. In addition, various Indo-Fijian

having been cheated into signing an agreement and having been brought to Fiji against their will.

Few Indo-Fijians have made an effort to supplement family stories or find any information, where no stories exist, by accessing other sources, such as Fiji's National Archives in Suva, where many of the original agreements of indenture signed by the labourers, as well as their arrival cards in Fiji, are kept. Few have read about the history of indentured migration and in general, awareness not only of their own families' migration histories but also of the historic circumstances of this migration is very limited.

Few Indo-Fijians know of their relatives in India and even fewer have met them. Five descendants of indentured Indians in Fiji among the 40 respondents had visited India, though only three made an effort to find their relatives. Some went for holidays to India or to visit some of her sacred sites. Satendra spent three months in India in 1998:

I had never really thought of visiting India but my brother visited and showed me all these nice photos. That's when I decided I should visit too. Basically, I wanted to see all those places mentioned in the religious texts. I travelled throughout northern and southern India and even went to the village where my ancestors had come from. This is near Madras in Tamil Nadu. But I didn't find any relatives . . . Partly, I travelled with other tourists—tourists from England and Australia. It was nice to have their company sometimes because I found Indians in India very aggressive. Like they never queue up. It's always a fight to get a train ticket and they are not polite. So it was easier being with other tourists . . . I really got fed up with them always asking for my caste. They couldn't make anything of my name, so they always asked . . . Travelling is one of my favourite things to do. But I would not go back to India again. I have seen the major things there.

Satendra's impressions of Indians in India are shared by other Indo-Fijians. While Satendra was unable to find his relatives, Satish Achari, of Suva, was more successful:

I went to India three times and travelled everywhere from Kashmir to Madras. I mostly wanted to see the country and that is why I went. But I also went to my ancestral village near Madras. It was difficult to find my relatives because there are so many Acharis there. We were all goldsmiths in the past.

countries such as Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad and South Africa. When specifically asked about Fiji, most were merely aware that this was the name of a country. Only 12 of the 52 respondents knew about an Indian presence there.

In addition, few Indo-Fijians had been in close contact with subcontinental Indians in Fiji. Not surprisingly, the views of each other were often based on ignorance, if not prejudice and stereotypes. Many respondents pointed out the differences rather than the similarities between the two groups, for instance noting the differences in language: 'our language is different. We understand their Hindi but they don't understand ours'. Some stressed that the culture of subcontinental Indians was 'purer' and 'stronger'. Others associated subcontinental Indians with backwardness and the caste system and found them hard to get along with. Abdul Ali said:

Indians from India have a strong culture. They are very communal based with their caste system. But they are also very materialistic. Everyone just thinks of making money whereas we are easy-going. Our aims are not so materialistic. We don't want to become rich. Our aim is just to have three meals a day . . . I also found that Indians from India were cheating and lying. I wouldn't blame them for that. It's probably because they live in such an overcrowded country.

Bindu Sharma, wife of a Hindu priest who occasionally hosted priests from India while touring Fiji, was also not impressed:

We sometimes find it really difficult when they visit. They don't respect privacy. We visit our friends quite a lot but we also like to be by ourselves. But Indians from India are always with others. And they are very intrusive. Like here, they go straight into our kitchen and just help themselves.

Subcontinental Indians who knew Indo-Fijians pointed out that they found some of the cultural and religious practices of Indo-Fijians strange, that they could not understand why few Indo-Fijians knew where exactly in India their ancestors came from and what their caste origin was. Importantly, many wrongly believed that the indentured migrants were mostly of low or untouchable caste background. One of a small number of professionals from India who worked in Fiji talked about his experience of living in Fiji:



has a population problem’, ‘maybe it’s a fascinating place but it’s poor and violent and polluted’, ‘India is a cheap and dirty place’ were among the comments repeated in many households when discussing the issue. As a consequence, many Indo-Fijians had two inconsistent images of India in mind—the romantic Hindu epic or Bollywood image and the idea of a poor and overcrowded place. These images were sometimes reconciled in that the former was associated with the past and the latter with the present. Overall, many Indo-Fijians felt proud to be able to trace their roots to an ancient culture while not being interested in present-day India, for which the connotations were negative.

Some respondents were surprised to be asked about India at all. Twelve of the 40 respondents were not interested in anything associated with India, such as one respondent who simply said, ‘India never comes to my mind. I have never actually thought of it.’ Overall, Muslims were somewhat more likely not to be interested in India than Hindus. Abdul commented:

I am not really interested in India. It’s just a place where my forefathers came from but I don’t feel any attachment to the place. I have not been there and why should I go? It’s not my homeland; it was my grandfather’s homeland. For me, it’s just another Asian country.

Nevertheless, following their secondary migration and settlement in Australia, the relationship of Indo-Fijians to their ancestral homeland changed, not least because in Australia many Indo-Fijians came into closer contact with subcontinental Indians for the first time.

### **Rethinking their relations to India in Australia**

#### *Encountering subcontinental Indians in Australia*

In Australia, the social distance between Indo-Fijians and subcontinental Indians is considerable even though the 40,000 Indo-Fijians are usually lumped by non-Indians under the general category of Indians, who number some 220,000. Indo-Fijians and India-direct migrants share some of the big events in the Indian calendar, such as celebrating Diwali in the same temple, and they also have other cultural traits in common, including the passion for Bollywood movies. However, there were no friendships or marriages between Indo-

Despite their inaccurate views of India and subcontinental Indians, many Indo-Fijians had always felt a vague sense of pride in being part of India's ancient culture. In Australia, many Indo-Fijians realised for the first time that they are rejected, ridiculed and kept at a distance by subcontinental Indians—the very people with whom they believed they shared a culture, even though most had never visited India and had met few subcontinental Indians, in whom they had often declared a lack of interest. When asked about their interactions with Indians from India, the respondents in Sydney could hardly hide their disappointment: 'They think they are better and treat us very badly', 'They don't even marry their children to us', 'We are more tolerant but they are culturally richer', 'They are very conservative. They have their caste system and all those traditions', 'Indians from India shake their head when they talk', 'They laugh at the way we speak Hindi' and similar comments were among the usual answers.

Relations between Indo-Fijians and subcontinental Indians became strained in 1997 after the publication of an article in the newspaper *Indian Post* in Sydney, which deeply offended Indo-Fijians. Among other things, the author of the article, titled 'Blood cousins or bloody cousins', told the reader how to tell an Indo-Fijian from a subcontinental Indian:

[A]n Indian with his hair dyed pink or with an earring will be a Fijian (Fiji Indian), a BC [blood cousin] girl is the only (Fiji) Indian who would want to be seen holding her boyfriend's hand in public, the bloke living down the road is most likely to be a labourer or council worker and the people speaking the funny Hindi and wearing flashy clothes will only be our Fiji Indian friends.

The article caused considerable uproar within the Indo-Fijian community in Sydney and some physical fights between groups of young Indo-Fijians and subcontinental Indians in nightclubs, as well as the banning of the newspaper from some Indo-Fijian spice shops. Nor was the article an idiosyncratic expression of one author's views. Interviews with the India-direct migrant respondents in my research indicate that such views remain common: 'they dress and behave like Westerners, only their skin is brown', 'you only have to go to an Indian night-club and observe Indo-Fijian women and you know everything about them' and 'they are all from Bihar and Biharis are known to

population is not as large, long established and self confident as that in the United Kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

In short, relations between Indo-Fijians and subcontinental Indians have not, on the whole, become closer following the relocation of Indo-Fijians to Australia and the increased personal encounters with subcontinental Indians. On the contrary, some Indo-Fijians feel ostracised by subcontinental Indians and in the process have become more conscious of their Pacific origin.

*At home in the Pacific or in the subcontinent?*

Indo-Fijians in Australia have day-to-day or emotional links to at least three countries: India, Fiji and Australia. Most migrants regard Australia as their new home and have little intention of leaving a country where they can build a more secure future and are treated as equals. Nevertheless, many respondents miss Fiji very much and continue to regard it as their emotional homeland. Given the impossibility of a return—at least under current political and economic conditions—Indo-Fijians outside Fiji feel exiled. It is a partial consolation to live sufficiently close to Fiji to retain regular social and kinship links. Given that since Fiji's independence in 1970 some 150,000 Indo-Fijians have left—out of just under 300,000 Indo-Fijians in Fiji at the time of the 1976 census—mostly resettling in the Pacific Rim, the majority of Indo-Fijians in Australia have relatives not only in Fiji but also in New Zealand, the United States and elsewhere. Many extended families are split between various countries; this results in a constant flow of people, money, goods and ideas to and fro across the Pacific. Family ceremonies such as marriages are often celebrated in Fiji and are occasions for the dispersed extended family to gather in Fiji and relive the old days. Discussions with Indo-Fijians in Australia suggest the emergence of Indo-Fijians as an Oceanic population in self-perception. At the same time, there have been attempts at re-establishing links to India, which many Indo-Fijians do still regard as their ancestral homeland, though Fiji has become their emotional homeland.

Since Indo-Fijians have no ancestral homeland to relate back to, other than in their imagination, Sydney-based Indo-Fijian journalist and filmmaker Satish Rai suggested that the descendants of indentured Indians reunite with their ancestral homeland India:

many Indo-Fijians regard Australia as their new permanent and secure home, Fiji as their emotional home and India as their ancestral home.

### **Conclusion**

The Indo-Fijian case demonstrates how descendants of migrants have moved away from their ancestral homeland as a result of the loss of personal links and cultural changes. Since most Indo-Fijians have little idea of either their caste background or their exact origin in India, they have lost the parameters to locate themselves in relation to other Indians. When, following their secondary migration, they have encountered direct migrants from India, the social and cultural distance has proved too great to be bridged by a shared ethnicity. Being unable to link back into Indian society, Indo-Fijians increasingly stress their emotional and day-to-day links into the Pacific. Their social and kinship links often incorporate several Pacific Rim countries as well as Fiji. While India retains an emotional importance, Indo-Fijians have emerged as a Pacific population in self-perception and in practice. Further research may determine whether parallel developments have occurred in other countries where the paths of India-direct migrants and secondary migrants cross. Moreover, comparative studies could explore whether the situation is specific for Indians or whether there are similarities with other diaspora such as that of the Chinese.

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### **Notes**

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1 In order to distinguish Indians from India from Indo-Fijians, the former are referred to as 'subcontinental Indians'. When referring to migrants in Australia, Indo-Fijians are 'twice migrants' whereas migrants from India are 'direct migrants'.

7 The situation of Gujaratis—who, in contrast to descendants from indentured Indians, have always remained in close contact with their kin in Gujarat and have maintained most aspects of their ancestral culture—is thus very different from that of descendants of indentured Indians. For this reason, they are excluded from the analysis in this article.

8 After India's independence in 1947, a Commissioner for the Government of India was sent to Fiji. When Fiji became independent in 1970, the post was upgraded to that of High Commissioner. Following the 1987 coups, the Indian High Commission in Suva, accused of interfering with Fiji's internal affairs, was downgraded to consular status but before long, even the Consulate was closed down. The Indian High Commission was reopened in 1999 and the sending of the first Fiji High Commissioner to India in 2004 marked the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the two countries.

9 The issue of indentured Indians came onto the political agenda only when middle-class Indians in South Africa tried to claim equality with Whites. Gandhi at that time was concerned that middle-class Indians in South Africa were stigmatised along with their indentured countrymen. Politicians in India, who were largely of middle-class background and concerned about their own reputation, demanded the cessation of indentured migration because every Indian abroad was termed a coolie. Gandhi's attention, in his writings on the situation of Indians in South Africa, to the situation of the indentured workers also had a major influence on public opinion in India (Gandhi 1970).

10 The eight countries are Australia, Canada, Finland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States.

11 This was partly a factor of the research locations in areas that did not experience indentured migration.

12 Indo-Fijians have carved out a niche in the Australian labour market, namely the ethnic niche market. Most spice shops, saree shops and Hindi video libraries are owned by Indo-Fijians. Being on average less qualified than India-direct migrants, they find that the ethnic market presents an alternative career path. Many India-direct migrants, on the other hand, are skilled professionals who work in the Australian mainstream labour market.

13 The situation of twice migrant Indians from East Africa in the United Kingdom is quite different again. Most East African Indians—about 20% of the total Indian population in the United Kingdom—are Gujaratis and Punjabis who had gone to East Africa as free migrants rather than indentured labourers. Most of them have an urban professional or business background and as a whole they are economically more successful in the United Kingdom than India-direct migrants. As a consequence, it is they who emphasise their separateness from India-direct migrants (Bhachu 1985: 11) and who reject being lumped into one category with India-direct migrants.

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