

# The Sikh Community of Fiji

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FIJI WAS A BRITISH COLONY till 1970. During 1879-1916, the recruiting agents in India, known as ARKATEES, sent about sixty thousand Indian labourers to work in the sugar-cane plantations of Fiji under an arrangement called INDENTURE SYSTEM. As a result of vigorous protests and campaigns, led by Indian leaders including Mahatma Gandhi, Rev. C. F. Andrews, G. K. Gokhale, Mrs. Sarojni Naidu and Banarsi Das Chaturvedi, the Indenture System was abolished because it was a kind of semi-slavery for the Indian labourers. But no substantial evidence is available to show that Sikh workers came to Fiji as indentured labourers.

In the early period of migration, no distinction was drawn between the Punjabis and the Sikhs. The term "Punjabi" as used in the official records of Fiji meant all the migrants, irrespective of caste and religion. (That time Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Pakistani Punjab were all parts of Punjab)

Some Punjabis did come during the indenture period, but they came as 'free immigrants'. That means they were not bound by the terms of that notorious document, called AGREEMENT, which is still known as "GIRMIT". All those labourers who were required to sign it before they came to Fiji, had to undergo semi-slavery conditions for at least five years while working in Fiji. The first batch of Punjabis, which perhaps included a small number of Sikhs, came to Fiji in 1904 from New Caledonia where they had found that the working conditions were not according to their expectations and the wages were not the same as promised by their agents. In Fiji, too, the situation was not brighter than it was in Caledonia and the British Consul in Noumea repatriated them to India as "distressed British subjects".

A small number of Sikh policemen, who were serving the Honkong and Shanghai Police Force during the early decades of the last century, proved themselves to be faithful and disciplined. Some of them were brought to Fiji by the Colonial Administration and were employed in the Fiji Police Force. Rev. C.F. Andrews who made three visits to Fiji to study the working conditions of the Indian population, reported back after his first visit in 1915, "These Indian, who were Sikhs, were paid a good monthly wages and expressed themselves, on the whole, contented with their positions".

Between 1910-1920, a small number of young Sikh migrants came to Fiji with the assistance of the shipping companies by paying commission to their agents but some of them, on reaching here, felt unhappy and miserable. The following letter, which was written in 1914 and addressed to the Deputy Commissioner Jullundur (now spelled as Jalandhar), makes an interesting reading:

*"We, all the Punjabis, now residing in Fiji Islands, left our country on the inducement and representation of Wali Mohammed and Atta Mohammed, caste Syed, resident of Karnana, Tehsil Nawansher, District Jullundur, Punjab. They have been sending our people during the last 5 years and, on each steamer, 45 or 46 men are being emigrated while they take Rs 35 as their commission for each individual and Rs 5 from the shipping company. We were made to understand that in Fiji we*

*can get work on daily wages at 5 shillings, but regret to say that even 2 shilling can hardly be earned – thus we have been suffering much. We had no previous experience of such tricks and they are deceiving the people and also against the law. We all paid Rs 325 as commission to them. We therefore request that enquiries be made and action be taken to stop further emigration. If possible money be refunded to us.”*

This letter was signed by forty six men, all from Jullundur district, twenty from Nawansher Tehsil and the rest from Gharshankar, Phagwara and Phillaur. But the majority of the Sikhs arrived between 1920-1930. As they were known for their initiative and enterprising spirit all over the world, they settled to do whatever work was available and earned a reputation as industrious and honest workers.

In 1930, the government of Fiji imposed restrictions because it feared unemployment and depressed economy. This step was taken inspite of labour demand from a few Europeans planters. The Indians, who had already settled in Fiji and their descendents who called themselves “Fiji born Indians” also raised objections to the unrestricted flow of new migrants. From 1931, the number was limited to 500-700 a year and during this decade some Sikh families, particularly those whose friends and relations had migrated earlier, were able to travel to Fiji. In the days of early settlement, they worked in Suva and Nausori areas. Some of them were engaged in small scale farming and shop-keeping business. In the late twenties and early thirties when new batches arrived from Punjab, they moved to the Western districts and became agriculturists. As time passed, they spread to all the cane-producing areas including Labasa but there was more concentration in some areas eg. Matniqara, Votua(Ba), Tagitagi(Tauva) Votualevu and Sabeto(Nadi) and Naidiri in Sigatoka district.

In the forties and fifties, only the professionals were given permits to enter and reside in Fiji and about a half a dozen Sikh teachers and doctors came to work.

Following the footsteps of other religious communities (such as Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji, Sanatan Dharam Sabha, Fiji Muslim League and many other organisations who have opened their primary, high schools and colleges, the Sikhs of Fiji have established the following institutions:

- 1) Khalsa College, Ba.
- 2) Shri Guru Nanak Khalsa Primary School, Ba.
- 3) Khalsa Secondary School, Labasa
- 4) Shri Guru Nanak Khalsa Primary School, Labasa
- 5) Nadiri Bay Khalsa Primary School, Sigatoka

Pupils of all races, including the natives, attend these institutions. The medium of instruction is English, but vigorous efforts are being made to teach Punjabi in Gurmukhi script in Ba and Labasa institutions to Sikh students. The Sikh Educational Society of Fiji formed in 1960 looks after the educational matters and the Sikh Association promotes religious and other interests of the community. There are sports, social and cultural groups in all the important Centres. *Bhangra* and *gidha* have recently become very popular among the Sikhs and non-Sikhs communities because of their colourful costumes and fast and rhythmical movements. The two radio stations give a lot of prominence to Punjabi songs. In spite of all this, there is regretful feeling among the Sikh intellectuals. They think that they are cut off from

the cultural mainstream because its flow is more towards U.K., U.S.A., and Canada than this part of the world. They would welcome frequent visits to Fiji from folk singers, *bhangra* and *gidha* dancers, Punjabi poets and writers, religious preachers and *kirtan jathas*.

Politically grouped as part of the Fiji Indian community, the Sikhs have been taking active part in Fiji politics. The constitution of Fiji classifies them as Indians. Majority of them have been supporters of the National Federation Party which was once predominantly the party of the Fiji-islands and its President was a Sikh for many years, but now the new generations are inclined more towards the Fiji Labour Party. Since Fiji's independence in 1970, two or three Sikhs have been the members of the Parliament.

The Sikhs of this country have built five Gurdwaras in different districts by donating large sums of money towards their construction. Those Gurdwaras, also known as Sikh temples by the non-Sikh communities, are situated in the main centres namely, Suva, Lautoka, Labasa, Tagitagi and Nasinu. The Suva Gurdwara, built in 1922, is the oldest of all. Not only are they places of worship, they also serve as a focus of social life. Marriage, death and sometimes birth (naming the new-born babies) ceremonies are performed in them and congregations on such functions provide them an opportunity to meet one another. After the functions, men and women sit outside separately and discuss social and political matters relating to Fiji and Punjab and sometime indulging in light, humorous conversation. As they have built their houses in their farms and do not have Punjab-type villages, the Gurdwaras have become social centres too for them. Baisakhi, Guru Nanak's and Guru Gobind Singh's birthdays are celebrated in all the Gurdwaras. Every now and then *Akhand Paaths* attract large number of people including sometimes the non-Sikhs too. The Fiji Sikhs have unstinted faith in *Gurbani* and teachings of all the Sikh Gurus.

The population of the Sikhs is roughly estimated to be five thousand only at present and about 85% of the families have their roots in Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts. In the sixties and seventies of the last century, it was approximately ten thousand, but the wave of migration to greener pastures lured them to leave this country. Paying tributes to the Fiji's Sikh community during the silver jubilee celebrations of Khalsa College and Khalsa Primary School at Ba in 1984, late Ratu David Toganivalu, then Deputy Prime Minister of Fiji and who was also a native chief commented:

*The Sikh Community occupies an important niche among the farming populace of this country. In fact the Sikh Community of Fiji is mostly engaged in farming and it has made a valuable contribution to the economy of this country. Large percentage of Sikhs live in Lautoka, Ba and Tauva regions. Perhaps the reason for this concentration in these areas is the fact that the West climatically is very much like Punjab, the area from which the Sikhs originally came to Fiji. The Sikhs are hardworking people.*

In recent years, not only the Sikhs but the whole country faced political crisis, suffering and economic problems because of the two coups; one by military general Sitiveni Rabuka in 1987 and the other by a civilian, George Speight in 2000. The Fijians, the natives of this country, are becoming more nationalistic in their outlook.

Their argument is that Fiji is their country and they, not any migrant race, should rule it.

Majority of the Indians are tenant farmers. When the land leases expire, the natives do not want to renew them. At present the Indian farmers, including Sikh families, are facing a very difficult situation created by landlessness, displacements and evictions. The Sikhs, energetic and industrious as they are, have the quality of adjustment. During the last few years, the trends towards migration have again accelerated, not due to their choice but because of the forces beyond their control. They are not very optimistic about their future in this country and therefore are trying to migrate to Canada, U.S.A., Australia and New Zealand. The most interesting feature of migration is that not a single Sikh family has gone back to Punjab to settle on the soil of their roots which their forefathers had left in the late twenties and early thirties of the last century.

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