



INDIAN MIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA

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The history of Indian immigration to Australia may be traced to the beginning of the nineteenth century when a small number of Indians were sent to Australia as convict labourers by the British colonial authorities in India. The Indian government's request to admit the convicts from India was accepted by the early settlers in Australia because they thought that the Indians might be usefully employed there. Thus for some years, Indian convicts appeared on passenger lists of arrivals in New South Wales. The first free immigration of Indians to Australia probably occurred in 1816 when William Browne, a large land holder in New South Wales, brought out a group of nine Indian workers.

With the rapid development of the pastoral industry in Australia in the early decades of the nineteenth century, a strong demand for cheap rural labour began to be raised. In their submissions made to the governor of the New South Wales in the years 1836-37, some planters and owners like John Mackay and J.R.Mayo indicated their preference for cheap and docile labourers from India, especially from the hill areas of Bengal. The growth of Britain's textile industry favoured pastoralism over agriculture in colony until the middle of the 19th century. However, despite the recruitment of Indians in large numbers as indentured labourers in many British colonies like Mauritius, Fiji, South Africa, and Guyana at this time, the colonial authorities in Australia opposed the recruitment of Indian labourers in large numbers. The reason given for this was that the emigration of Indian labourers would create an inferior and servile class of persons subject to restrictions which would bring agricultural labour into disrepute and thereby discourage the emigration of agricultural workers from Britain. Nevertheless, official disapproval did not entail the prohibition of private importation of the labourers. John Mackay in New South Wales brought over forty labourers from India in 1837. P. Friell, who earlier had stayed in India, brought in 1844, twenty-five domestic workers to Sydney, among whom were a number of women and children. In 1846, the ship Orwell brought to Australia fifty-one Indian coolies under private indenture to three land holders, one of whom was W.C. Wentworth. Most of the Indians who emigrated to Australia during the first half of the nineteenth century were recruited as farm labourers and some were recruited independently to meet the growing need for domestic servants.

In the 1870-80 period, camel-drivers were brought from India's north-west frontier region by pastoralist L.L.Smith to use camels for transporting goods in the arid zones. Although the camel drivers were called Afghans, they were brought to Australia till the 1930s mostly from Baluchistan, Sindh, the North West Frontier Provinces, and Rajasthan. The camels not only contributed greatly to the solution of Australia's transport problems in the inaccessible parts of the Australian outback but also played an important part in the construction of telegraph lines and railways in various parts of Australia.

By the 1860s some 200 Anglo-Indians (described as persons of mixed European and Indian descent) arrived in Australia, many of whom to work as compositors for Henry Parkes printing press. The closing decades of the nineteenth century saw the arrival of more ethnic Indians also who joined agricultural work and hawking. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were more than seven thousand India-born persons in Australia of whom around 58 percent were ethnic Indians. Some were persons stationed in sugarcane and banana plantations, some worked as hawkers and pedlars, \ some moved about freely as traders and entrepreneurs, and a handful joined the skilled labour force.

By the closing years of the nineteenth century, legislative measures began to be introduced by a number of colonial governments in Australia to restrict or prohibit coloured or Asian immigration. This was reaffirmed at a meeting of colonial premiers. in 1896 where it was resolved to apply the exclusion from entry to all coloured races which would include ethnic Indians despite their status as British subjects.

With the enactment of the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901, there was virtually no further Indian immigration to Australia for the next fifty years. However, Indians already settled in Australia prior to 1901 were permitted to remain, although in some instances, they continued to be the focus of discriminatory laws and restrictions. In 1913, Queensland passed a law that affected Indians in restricting participation of coloured labour from involvement in the production of sugar unless they were exempted by certificates to say that they had passed a dictation test in such a language as the Secretary for Agriculture might direct. A few years later, similar provisions were applied to the banana industry, although subsequent qualifications were introduced to exempt Indians classified as British subjects. Indians were also subject to laws prohibiting the acquisition of property by aliens. The number of India-born persons in Australia declined by about 1,000 in the years 1901-1911 and for the following thirty-five years, the population remained quite stable (between 6,500 and 7,000). Some Indians continued to work in the sugar and banana plantations of northern New South Wales and formed the foundations for the present-day communities of Punjabi Sikhs and Muslims in Woolgoolga and Coffs Harbour.

During and after the First World War, the matter of Indian immigrants again came to public notice. India's wartime help was rewarded by a decision to deal as generously as possible with application by former Indian residents who wished to return to the commonwealth and who had failed, in some cases because of the tough policy of the early years, to obtain the usual certificates prior to their departure from Australia. At the end of the war, India's contribution to the allied efforts so impressed Australians that some were willing to make further concessions : the Reciprocity Resolution of 1918 contained a reaffirming of the policy of temporary entry for merchants, students and tourists between the dominions and India.

The post-World War II period witnessed a change in Australia's policy towards non-European immigrants. Modifications to the white Australia policy included a new category for entry and stay for highly qualified Asian. This distinguished or well qualified category had important implications for the north coast Indians. As the rural settlers were transforming themselves from wage labourers into owners, the new policy opened the door to professional and technical Asian settlers, including doctors, chemists, economists and teachers.

In the years after India's independence, a large number of India-born British citizens and Anglo-Indians sought immigration to Australia. These people identified themselves with Western culture, were predominantly Christian, and spoke English as their primary language. With the entry into Australia of Anglo-Indian settlers and of immigrants born in India of European descent, the number of India-born persons increased from 8,160 in 1947 to 15,754 in 1966. Overall ethnic Indians accounted for only 19 percent of the 1966 total.

In 1966, Australia relaxed its formerly restrictive immigration policy towards persons of non-European descent. To move towards high technology and expanded economy, Australia needed increased number of skilled and educated immigrants, which was not being fulfilled by people of European origins. This resulted in the lowering of restrictions against Asian immigrants. Universal criteria for determining eligibility for permanent settlement were introduced, which gave emphasis

to the applicant's education and professional qualifications, technical and trade skills, and facility with the English language. Under the new policy, the number of Indians granted entry to Australia continued to increase with the number of India-born persons going to 41,657 by 1981. There was a relatively high proportion of professionals among this wave of immigrants from India including doctors, engineers, university teachers, and computer programmers. Since 1981, the annual number of India-born persons arriving in Australia has been increasing steadily, reaching a high of more than 5,000 per year in the period 1990-92. One important feature of this increased rate of migration has been that for the period 1981-93, the total emigration to Australia of around 30,000 India-born persons consisted almost exclusively of ethnic Indians. As a consequence, the proportion of ethnic Indians has grown to over 50 percent of Australia's India-born population. According to the 1991 census the total number of India-born persons in Australia was 60,958 and two years later it had increased to around 72,500. However, in addition to persons born in India, there are many thousands of other overseas-born persons in Australia of Indian ethnic origin who emigrated from places other than India, including Fiji, Singapore, Malaysia, East Africa, and South Africa. Thus, at the 1986 census some 71,200 persons indicated that they were of Indian ancestry and it has been further estimated that in 1988, 0.41 percent of all Australians were of Indian origin.

Contrary to their settlement patterns in the nineteenth century, the Indian immigrants in Australia today are a highly urbanized population and in 1991, only 8 percent were living outside one of the major cities. Almost 85 percent of Indians in Australia are concentrated within three states with almost exactly one third in New South Wales, 32 percent in Victoria and just under 19 percent in Western Australia. Indians in Australia do not tend to form residential communities and their settlement in the country is of heterogeneous and dispersed character. The exception to this is the sizeable Sikh community in Woolgoolga on the north coast of New South Wales where the immigrants from Punjab settled in the nineteenth century. The Sikhs of Woolgoolga, most of whom migrated to Australia from the same district of Punjab, have close links with their families and kin groups. They are conscious of their traditional culture, religion, and dress. The new migrants, on the other hand, have a higher degree of association with the wider Australian society. They live apart from their kinsmen mainly due to professional requirements but they are always in contact with their family members and friends, living in different parts of Australia.

Both old and new immigrants have encouraged and supported their children to study and obtain a profession. The Indian immigrants see personal success in their children and so they continue to invest in them even when they become adults. This is why the Indian immigrants in Australia have one of the highest levels of educational training and qualifications of any group in Australia. In 1991, 59.4 percent held some educational or trade qualification which was a considerably higher proportion than that of the total Australian population which is only 38.8 percent. Furthermore, an exceptionally high 33.3 percent of Indian immigrants held post-secondary qualifications compared with 12.81 percent of all Australians. The unemployment rate among Indians was in 1991, slightly above the Australian average, mainly due to their large influx in the late 1980s when Australian economy was moving into a recessionary stage. However, since 1991, the unemployment rate among Indians has declined considerably, with the rate of January 1995 calculated at 8.7 percent, well below the national figure of 9.7 percent. With the generally high level of educational attainment among Indian immigrants, many of them are employed in professional, technical and white collar occupations. Thus in 1991, among India-born persons in employment, 28.7 percent were in professional or para-professional jobs, 10.4 percent were managers or administrators, and 21.1 percent were in clerical positions. Furthermore, the median annual income for the India-born population of Australia was 31 percent above the median income for the total Australian population. Indians in Australia come from a variety of regional and language backgrounds and also from different religious communities. The largest sub-community in Australia is probably that of Hindi-speaking immigrants from northern India and in 1991, almost 10 percent reported that they spoke Hindi at home. However, among the second generation Indians in Australia numbering 37,000 according to the 1991 census, the large majority (88.8 percent) speak only English at home and there is concern by some that the Indian native languages will be lost unless some positive steps are taken.

A number of regional and cultural associations have been established by the Indian immigrants in each of the major cities of Australia. The primary functions of such groups are to provide a forum for people who speak the same language, to meet periodically to share views on matters of common interest, such as news concerning regional political issues within India, and to celebrate special regional festivals. In some cases, there may be strong regional and religious commonalities especially among particular Sikh and Muslim groupings, but in many instances, while they may differ in religious affiliation, people from the same region take part in most regional cultural activities. There are also some non-regional and non-sectarian associations of Indians such as the Indian Society of Western Australia and the Indo-Australian Cultural Society of Sydney.

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