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INDIAN MIGRATION TO NEW ZEALAND

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Migration of Indians to New Zealand from the Navsari and Surat regions of Gujarat province in western India and Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur from Punjab commenced on a mild scale about a hundred years ago. The reasons for migration grew from economic, political, and demographic considerations. The economic decline of the region of Gujarat under British rule in the nineteenth century was the major factor responsible for encouraging Indians to leave the area. The result of the worsening economic situation and the growth of population was "increasing poverty, rural underemployment and the decline of village industries. The response of the Indian peasant was either acceptance and increasing poverty or movement away from the area. Many chose the second alternative and amongst these were the Indians who came to New Zealand. The people of the Navsari and Surat regions had always been in close touch with the people of the Western world and with the increasing pressures of the British colonial rule, the desire for prosperity was more intensely felt among these people. New Zealand seemed to provide them with an opportunity to improve their economic and material status.

The migration to New Zealand was initially “a small extension of the movement to Australia.” In or around 1890, two brothers, Bir Singh Gill and Phuman Singh Gill crossed the Tasman from Australia. Typically, they were Malawis and the few Punjabis who entered New Zealand during the next fifteen or twenty years were mainly Malawis or Majhairs. The Doabi migrants began to predominate during the years immediately before World War I and from that time until New Zealand closed its doors to Asians in 1920-21, practically all the Punjabi migrants entering the country were Doabis[2].

The Punjabis, forming at present the second largest group among Indians in New Zealand, also recognised economic pressure to be the main contributing factor. Although Punjab was a rich area, there were strong emigration tendencies in the region because of increasing population, decreasing size of holdings due to subdivision of land, falling production and declining water level. During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, news of opportunities overseas began to penetrate many Punjabi villages which were brought by those serving as soldiers and police in Malaya and Hong Kong under the British rule. The first wave of the Punjabis thus consisted of those men who either had found their way to New Zealand from military or police service or those who had followed the former as a result of information communicated back home. The second wave of the Punjabis to New Zealand included those who came from Fiji. In their route to Fiji, many Punjabis who had stopped at Auckland, realized that a knowledge of English was sufficient to secure permission to land since in order to check Asian migration, the New Zealand government, under an Immigration Restriction Act in 1899, had made an English language test compulsory for immigrants. Many of the Punjabis who had reached Fiji learned sufficient English required for the test and presented themselves at Auckland.[3]

The majority of Indians arriving in New Zealand intended farming but since land was expensive to purchase, they were forced into laboring jobs such as road building, brick making, and bottle collecting. Indians in the urban areas worked as hawkers of fruit and vegetables. The rural development of the North Island provided the immigrants with the occupational activity of cutting flax in the swamps of the Hawaki plains and the Waikatu. This was soon accompanied by ditch digging in the same areas as farmers converted water logged swamp into drained dairy pasture.

In the meanwhile , a new development began , one which was to become the primary focus of Punjabi ambitions in New Zealand . Ever since World War I , there had been a few Punjabis who aspired to land ownership in New Zealand and from the late 1920s , a few began to realize this ambition as successful dairy farmers. By the time, World War II commenced in 1939 , there were still very few Punjabi dairy farms in New Zealand but the objective had been established and a significant beginning had been made. After World War II , the proceeds of scrub cutting were increasingly directed to the purchase of dairy farms and today " the wealth of the Punjabi community is conspicuously concentrated in Waikato dairy farming" Those who were unable to purchase dairy farms began to indicate a secondary preference for factory employment and a movement toward the southern suburbs of Auckland city became evident . There they walked and invested the savings increasingly in urban properties and some of them moved into corner dairies or other small scale retailing businesses.

The objective of the average Indian immigrants seemed to revolve principally about earning the maximum money under the existing circumstances, saving as much as possible and living on the basis of maximum cheapness. They worked much harder in New Zealand than they did at home. Partly fear and partly hope for the future made these immigrants the hardest workers in the host society. Almost all of them lived singly and their savings were higher than those of the Europeans who had larger family responsibilities. By 1923, some Indians were leasing land in two important areas around Pukekohe Hill and Otahuhu, which are the main areas devoted to market gardening."[4]

The sharp rise in the number of Indians coming to New Zealand in the post-World War I period brought severe and hostile reactions from Europeans who demanded stricter legislation to curb further Asian immigration. The Act of 1920, which gave more rigorous immigration laws, slowed down the rate of entry. In 1926, the "White New Zealand League" was formed with the goal of preventing any further entrance of Asiatics and keeping New Zealand a White man's country. Early Indian settlers had to face various types of discriminatory behaviour from the Europeans in New Zealand. They were not permitted in private bars and hotels and were not admitted to balcony seats in the picture theatres as those were meant exclusively for the Whites. Indians were also excluded from the membership of the Local Growers Association. Some land-owners refused to lease land to Indians and many would not sell land to Asiatics.

In the face of the above circumstances, a need was felt by the pioneers of the Indian community to organise such institutions as would safeguard the rights and privileges of these people and remove all obstacles to their settlement and decent living in the country. On 20th July 1926, members of the Indian community decided to organise a central association called the "New Zealand Indian Central Association" at a meeting held at Taumarunui, with the objective to assist the common welfare of Indians in New Zealand and to provide the means and facilities for Indians to obtain full benefits of British justice in New Zealand.[5]

The major contribution of the Indian Central Association since its inception has been to keep the spirit of unity among the New Zealand Indians and preparing a suitable atmosphere for the inculcation of a cooperative spirit between Indians and the host society. The Association, showing loyalty to the New Zealand government, regarded the Indian community as an equal partner in the growth and development of the New Zealand society and has also been instrumental in creating among Indians, a new kind of self- awareness which dispels any sense of inferiority. During the early Indian settlements, the Association also fought for just laws and solved problems pertaining to immigration. It has always acted as a representative body of the Indians in many vital issues and succeeded in drawing the attention of the government to remedy such problems.

There are a number of branch associations in various parts of New Zealand affiliated to the Central Indian Association. These associations organise Indian festivals and Indian Republic Day ceremonies and hold classes and discussions on Indian languages and culture. The Auckland Indian Association, which is Gujarati-dominated, established a Sanskara Kendra in 1964. It arranges classes on the Gujarati language, holds discussions on Bhagwat Gita, Ramayana and other religious texts, and organises the ceremonial dance "Garba". It has its own community centre, the Gandhi Hall at Auckland, which was built in 1955. The country section Indian Association, dominated by the Sikhs from Punjab, had a Gurudwara constructed at Te Rapa on the northern outskirts of Hamilton in 1977. The Indian Association of Pukekohe got the Nehru Hall built in 1953 which was the first Indian community hall in New Zealand. These branch associations help Indians in solving their various
problems and have contributed greatly to the sustenance of Indian culture and traditions in New Zealand.

The real substantial increase in the size of the Indian community in New Zealand has taken place since 1945. The number of Indians in New Zealand at the time of the 1945 census was only 1,554. This number increased to 6,843 by the 1966 census. Since 1966, the growth of Indian population again slowed down, mainly due to political and economic conditions which tended to restrict Asian immigration. The pace of Indian migration to New Zealand was again accelerated since the military coup which took place in Fiji in May 1987 and the new government started adopting policies against the Fijian Indians. At present, there are nearly 30,000 Indians living in various parts of New Zealand.

The pattern of employment and occupation among Indians in New Zealand has been changing considerably. A considerable proportion of early Indian settlers was largely engaged in agriculture and commerce. The changing economic structure of New Zealand and the influx of so many new arrivals of Indians during the post-World War II period, with different types of skills and qualifications, necessitated their seeking new occupations. The number of Indians working in manufacturing and transportation, storage and communication has increased quite substantially. Since the Second World War, the Indian community has taken on a completely new settled character. The occupational diversification is most noticeable. There is also a significant number of Indians involved in high status occupations such as medical doctors, lawyers, scientists, and university teachers. There is seldom any case of discrimination today and Indians realise their common stakes in the well-being of New Zealand."[6]

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