

## Indo-Fijian Context



### History

Indians were first introduced to Fiji in the 1880s, and between 1879 and 1916 over 60,000 indentured labourers came from various parts of India to work in the cane plantations. Many other Pacific islanders came at the same time, but most returned. The Indian migrants remained, primarily on the two main islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.

By the 1940s, Indo-Fijians made up the majority of the population, outnumbering indigenous Fijians. It was only in the 1980s and 1990s that this situation was reversed. A key factor in their diminishing numbers in recent decades has been the country's continued instability, particularly its succession of coups, and the occasional flaring of nationalist sentiment against them. This is illustrated by the dramatic increase in migration: while between 1978 and 1986, just over 20,700 Fijians left the country at an annual rate of 2,300, in the ensuing decade (1987-1996) the rate more than doubled to 5,005 every year. The overwhelming majority, roughly 90 percent, of these departing citizens were Indo-Fijian.

### Culture

Indo-Fijians now comprise the second largest ethnic group in Fiji and are culturally and economically diverse. More than 90 per cent are descendants of indentured labourers (*Girmityas*) and the remainder are descendants of free migrants. The majority are Hindu, and a minority are Muslim or Christian. Nowadays, the indo-fijian population of Fiji are concentrated in urban areas, monopolising small businesses and living in urban districts.

As the majority of Indo-Fijians are Hindu, Hindu temples can be found in urban areas near to Indo-Fijian communities. Indo-Fijian communities rarely speak in Fijian, communicating with Fijians in English if necessary. They generally speak a particular variety of Hindi unsurprisingly called "Fijian Hindi".

## Influence in Fiji

Despite the racial tensions between ethnic Fijians and Indo-Fijians, their influences in Fiji cannot be denied. A small example would be the popular menu for Fijians, curry is one of the favourite dishes in Fijian villages as well as a spattering of other Indian dishes.

Their impact on the Fijian economy is also important. As the Indo-Fijian's live mostly in the urban areas of Fiji whereas ethnic Fijians live in both urban and rural, the jobs they take up often involve working in the city or the major farms and industries of sugar cane farming and salt production. The sheer volume of Indo-Fijians means that they make up a large proportion of the Fijian economy and their inclination to take on business roles in the city rather than rural subsistence farming means that their impact on the economy is significant.

## Racial Tensions

The concept of *vanua*, as important as it is in Fijian culture, leaves little space for any other race other than indigenous Fijians to have rights to native Fijian lands. As beautiful as *vanua* as a concept is, Indo-Fijians are generally not considered to take part in it for indigenous Fijians leading to inevitable rifts between the two ethnicities. When land and everything with it is seen as extremely important to the extent that it is ancestral heritage, the implications for an alternate people are severe.

80% of the land in Fiji is owned by ethnic Fijians, the various *mataqali* (clans), after it became illegal for outsiders to own this land in the late 1800s from a decree by Fiji's first governor Sir Arthur Gordon to protect the rights of indigenous Fijians and to preserve their culture from the pressures of outside powers. In theory, Indo-Fijians remain landless. From the late 1990s, as leases came up for renewal, many landlords would only offer short leases at higher rents. Recently, these warrants have been allowed to expire over and over again but disproportionately affect the Indo-Fijian population.