

**New Zealand Indian Diaspora Convention 2014: A Dialogue with Academic,
Business and Community Leaders
(New Zealand India Research Institute and AUT Business School, Auckland)
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Academic Panel: Indians in New Zealand: past and present

**Indian History in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Presentation by Associate
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(notes from presentation)

Thanks to Sekhar and AUT organisers, Edwina and NZIRI for inviting me here.
Wonderful to see so many here today.

Recent census revealed huge growth in the Indian community in New Zealand and the growth of Hindu faiths. Quite large numbers for NZ - especially compared to earlier times: eg 671 Indians in the 1921 census. But sometimes we get a bit blinded by numbers and I argue that those small numbers of Indians were highly significant - so lets cast back into the history of Indians in NZ.

Indians have a very long history in New Zealand. They are among the earliest settlers - after the tangata whenua.

Indians were visitors here on ships – East India Company probably from very late 18thC. A few points here:

- integration with Maori - first record is 1813. Bay of Islands
- these few Indians were scattered throughout NZ – not just in North Island as we associate Indians with today. For example, near Dunedin an Indian (from Surat) became advisor and translator for Ngai Tahu, he married locally and was known as Te Anu. His family settled on Rakiura.
- the other Indian who only very recently made it into history books was Edward Peters who discovered first workable claim of gold in Otago – leading to Otago Gold rushes.

Indians in New Zealand are part of the mainstream of NZ history – not marginal but integral to the development of the nation and economy, to national identity, neighbourhoods

Indians were part of national events eg World Wars, great depression, etc.

Note also ethnic and religious complexity – new research revealing more stories of Muslims and Punjabis in NZ during the 19th century and about Anglo-Indians. My research and Hew McLeod's focused on the two main groups that established the Indian communities in NZ - Punjabis and Gujaratis.

- trace this to 2 Punjabi brothers – Phuman Singh Gill and Bir Singh Gill – arrived 1890s and Keshaw Daji c 1902 Gujarat
- among these pioneers were Ganda Singh and Daya Kaur who raised their family in remote coal mining community at Runanga on the West Coast.

- Indian settlers were from villages –part of early waves to South and East Africa, SE Asia, Fiji. These networks stemmed from Gujarat and Punjab. This was reinforced by our immigration laws – 1920 Act prohibited new Indian immigration unless a child of, or married/engaged to an Indian male here.

Immigration policy did not change until 1974 and then further opening up of NZ's doors especially for business and professional migrants – led to new waves from the subcontinent and other reaches of the Indian diaspora
Also Fiji coups (1987, 2000) pushed thousands of Fiji Indians to NZ
– this, and new waves from India changed the contours of the Indian diaspora in NZ –opened up vast array of Indian goods and services that were previously unavailable.

I also must mention what Sir Anand Satyanand termed the dark side of our history – discrimination Indians faced – formally and informally.
Most overt – White New Zealand League at Pukekohe – but there were many other shameful examples. Indians did not accept and protested – especially through the NZ Indian Central Association – that was formed around same time.

Part of the hysteria of the White New Zealand League was the visible economic success of Indians –leasing and buying land and shops – but this overlooked how many Indians in the early 20th century were part of NZ's working class - in monotonous, dirty work such as cleaning, ditch digging, swamp-draining, brick-works, scrub cutting, - bottle-collectors or hawkers – selling fruit – or other goods in remote communities eg Santa Singh in the Ureweras to Rua Kenana. Indians (and Chinese) had an important role in the extension of goods and services in rural NZ and in the expanding urban centres.

By the 1920s – this was mostly in the North Island – although there were a few Gujarati families in Christchurch.

Some were successful entrepreneurs /professionals– but over-emphasis here can overlook the contribution of those less well off or who worked in factories – later in clerical/service jobs – far more than the stereotypes (especially that of the corner dairy) suggests.

Indian families were established after World War II – these mothers led extremely hard lives –labour in small family shops and farms, raising families, often isolated from other Indians.

They faced generational tensions - their children fluent in English, at school, etc and for girls esp., might challenge some of traditional gender roles of their parents.

But these women also forged quiet and neighbourly relationships – such as a young bride from South Africa living in 1970s NZ – sitting at her table crying and longing for her own mother – when an elderly neighbour sees her and invites her over for a cup of tea. From this a lifelong friendship, help when children are born and advice about ways to meet women in the community.

Sports teams – also crucial in relationships and perceptions from other Kiwis

as well as for cementing the Indian community here.

A 'Kiwi Indianness' emerged among Indian settlers in New Zealand. Whether it be gardening, sports, knitting, politics, schooling, supporting the Labour Party, drinking beer, some (not much) intermarriage.

Links with India were kept up – these were transnational migrants – visits – this is when children were conceived, houses built, marriages arranged - remittances, importance of participation in Indian nationalist movement

Indian nationalist events: (eg Independence Day, Republic Day, Gandhiji's birthday/ sporting tournaments more important than Diwali is today.

I have been mainly talking about the earlier Indian diaspora but this is not to overlook the massive changes in NZ's Indian populations since 1980s – which I am sure my colleagues will elaborate upon. Some academics see the New Zealand Indian diaspora as a divided history but I don't think that's very fruitful – because waves of diaspora are more fluid and complicated – and these soon become localised – even with transnational networks.

I haven't talked much about the standout achievements in Indian settlement in NZ – but I have stressed that Indians in NZ have a humble but rich heritage – that laid the foundations for later immigrants – but equally is very much part of Aotearoa NZ's history.

For further information see: Leckie, J. *Indian Settlers. The Story of a New Zealand South Asian Community*. Dunedin, Otago University Press (2007).