

Discovering Indian Roots

[Paper series Part 1 of 3] by Dr Kamlesh Sharma, Canberra.
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Author's note:

This is the first paper in a series of three that I am writing that provides guidance to others who may be interested in tracing their ancestral roots in India. It is based on my personal experiences that led to the recent success in making contact with relatives in India. It is my humble wish to provide as much information as possible to assist others, who may wish to pursue the challenge to discover their roots in India without unnecessary complications.



Background

The early Fijiiindian community hardly spoke of the *Girmit* era and tried to put behind the slavery experiences at the hands of the British and move ahead with their life mainly for the betterment of future generations. Some found it too hard to talk about the experiences as it brought back severe painful memories so they decided to suffer in silence in the hope that they would take the pain with them when they die as opposed to sharing it with their children.

Most of the future generations were too involved in their day to day tasks to make a living and no one took serious notice of any information that was readily available in those days. When the new generation of Fijiiindians realised the need for such information to establish some contact with homeland in India, it was late as majority of the *Girmitiyas* had left us forever during the 1970s.

All that most could do was recall through word of mouth from friends and relatives as to where their ancestors (grandfather, grandmother, grand uncle and others) originated from and what their parent's name was including other vital information such as under what name and caste they migrated to Fiji, the circumstances leading to their departure from India, etc.

Vital Data Required

As a starting point, one needs to have as much information as possible about their ancestors that can be collected from their parents (if they are still alive), elder brothers and sisters and any other elder relatives. Every bit of information assists in the huge jigsaw puzzle that needs to be put together to solve the problems at hand and to be able to reach the desired goal.

As one has to travel to Suva to the National Archives of Fiji to track down the immigration pass of the ancestor, it is crucial to have relevant data handy prior to undertaking the travel.



[Indian Lady dressed with jewellery in the early Girmite era in Fiji.
Picture courtesy of National Archives of Fiji]

Information such as name of the ancestor and their father's name is a crucial starting point. It would also assist if you can narrow it down to where exactly the *Girmite* was served by the ancestor in Fiji.

It is also important to know exactly under which name the ancestors migrated to Fiji for example *Brahmins* were not allowed to migrate to Fiji as they were considered by British to be educated and would create unnecessary trouble among *Girmities* in Fiji by organising labour unions to demand better wages and living conditions. As a result, most *Brahmins* who did come to Fiji changed their names to reflect the caste of *Thakurs* and *Kumhars*. Once in Fiji, they changed their names to those used in India but their immigration pass was under the false name. You also need to know if they changed their father's name as well.

These data are vital as there is a high probability that people of same or similar names came to Fiji under the *Girmit* system and they would all be listed in the register kept at the National Archives of Fiji.

Some names are very common and one can find ten to fifteen names of similar spelling in the register. This can only be narrowed down if the ancestors father's name is known (this is best way to narrow the field) or if the location of where the *Girmit* was served in Fiji is known.

Unless this information can be narrowed, it is very hard to pick the right individual. If this basic data is not right, it could result in picking the immigration pass of the wrong individual that could be disastrous at the end of the process when one reaches India. Therefore, it is very important to do your homework and basic family research very thoroughly.

So now you have the vital data...

What's Next?

Armed with the data, you need to visit the National Archives of Fiji located in Suva. They do not allow any bags to be taken into the reading/research room so these need to be left with the reception staff.

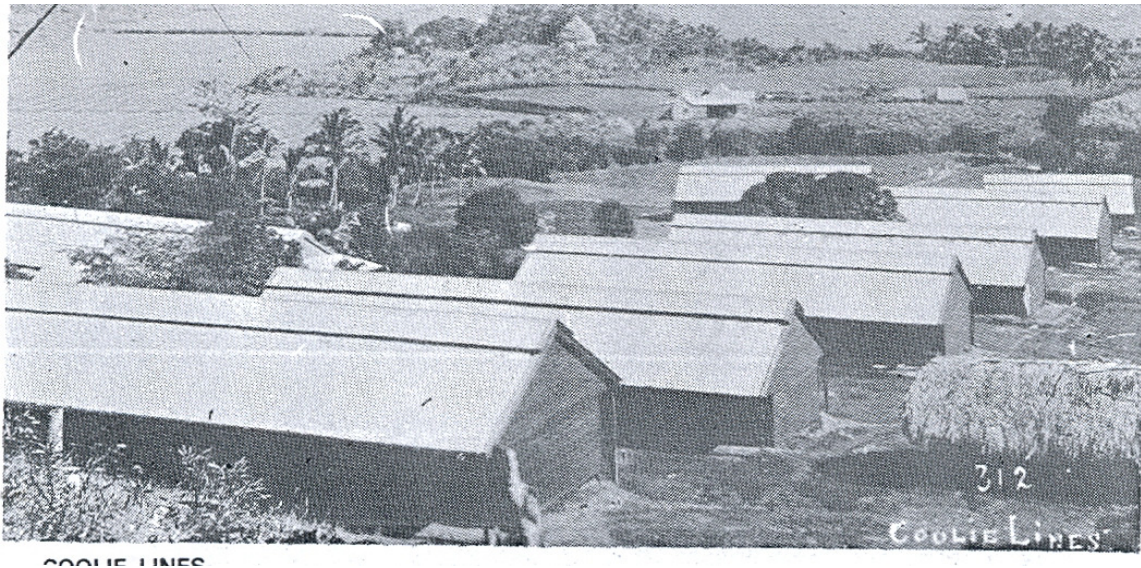
Staff are very helpful and one of the first things I did was to approach the supervisor in the reading room and explained why I was there. I was directed to the list of *Girmit* immigration pass master register to find the ancestor and was asked to try and narrow it down before the staff member could assist further.

These registers are in alphabetic order and contain names of the immigrants, their father's name, name of the ship they came on and the immigration pass number.

Seeing this register is an overwhelming experience in itself!

Once you locate the name of the ancestor, your vital information comes in very handy when there is more than one person with similar name in the register.

When the individuals are identified in the register or when you are able to narrow it down to a couple, the National Archives officer will bring the actual pass on the computer screen for you to have a look and verify some additional vital data such as place of *Girmit* in Fiji, place of origin in India, etc.



[Coolie Lines for *Girmityas* in Fiji. Picture courtesy of National Archives of Fiji]

After considering the information, you will then be able to narrow it down to the exact immigration pass of the ancestor with appropriate details on it.

Once everything has been identified and you are confident which immigration pass number is needed, the Archives officer will give you the details on a piece of paper and will arrange a copy for you.

You will then be asked to proceed to the Accounts Section which is located in another part of the building to pay the charges (a nominal amount) to cover the photocopying charges. An official Government of Fiji revenue receipt will be issued which then needs to be shown to the Archives Officer in the reading/research room before a copy of the pass would be given to you.

My Search Experience

Apart from my eldest *Mausa Ji*, I did not have the opportunity to see any of my grandparents from both sides of my parents. My *Mausa Ji* passed away in 1977 and I recalled all his stories which I have documented in my next book, '*Gulaami: Slavery in Fiji*'. This book is due for release during 2009.

In one of my searches, I did not know the name of my *Aja's* father but I knew that he served his *Girmit* in Ba. Out of five names in the register, only one had been allocated to Ba and I was able to get the correct immigration pass.

In my eldest *Mausa's* case, he was the only one by the name in the register so it was an easy search.

In my *Aji's* case, there were too many similar names in the register and I could not narrow it down as I had no other details about her. I had to let this one pass by with a very heavy heart. However, I had great success in locating my *Nani's* immigration pass.



[Book cover with spinal design. It is currently in the process of being designed for printing]

In one of my friend's case, his grandfather had changed his name to Din Mohammad from Din Dayal Sharma (to escape conviction for murder in India) prior to his migration to Fiji.

My friend had no other details and there were about thirty other individual entries for Din Mohammed and Dean Mohammad in the register.

As we had no idea what he would have recorded as his father's name that was the end of the search. The probability was that he would have faked all the other details on the immigration pass as well. This was a tragic end to the search.

We would have been more successful if more vital data could be obtained from my friend's family but no one was prepared to share any information (for unknown reasons).

Next Phase

Once you get a copy immigration pass, I strongly recommend that you make multiple copies and if possible, scan it and store an image on your personal computer. This is important in case the paper gets wet or if the ink on it evaporates for some reason erasing vital information needed for the next phase of the process.

Having obtained the correct immigration pass is just one part of the jigsaw puzzle. The actual fun starts from here which I will cover in comprehensive detail in my next paper on this topic.



[Passing time by playing games in the Coolie Lines in Fiji.
Picture courtesy of National Archives of Fiji]

19461
COLONIAL EMIGRATION FORM No. 41.

**WOMAN'S
EMIGRATION PASS.**

HEALTH CLASS.

DEPÔT No. 1053 " Elle " PROCEEDING TO FIJI.
For Ship _____
No. 258.

Fiji Government Emigration Agency,

21, GARDEN REACH,

CALCUTTA, the 17 — 4 — 1900.

PARTICU- { Place, Dharwad,
LARS OF { Date, 30-3-1900.
REGIS- { No. in Register, 276
TRATION, {
Name, Dharajidi,
Father's Name, Satpur, Gurdin Pande
Age, 20
Caste, Shastri Brahmin
Name of next-of-kin, Surgibux, Bho. Ramprasad
If married, name of husband, _____
District, Dharwad,
Thana, Bitapur,
Village or Town & Mahalla, Chadai,
Bodily Marks, Scar on chin,
Occupation in India, Labourer
Height, 4 Feet. 10 Inches.

CERTIFIED that we have examined and passed the above named Woman as fit to emigrate; that she is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that she has been vaccinated since engaging to emigrate.

DATED

The

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[Signature]
Surgeon Superintendent.

[Signature]
Depôt Surgeon.

CERTIFIED that the Woman above described has appeared before me and has been engaged by me on behalf of the Government of Fiji as willing to proceed to that country to work for hire; and that I have explained to her all matters concerning her engagement and duties. This has also been done at the time of Registration by the Registering officer appointed by the Indian Government.

DATED

The 5,

4.

1900.

[Signature]
Government Emigration Agent for FIJI.

PERMITTED to proceed as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to

FIJI.

DATED

The

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[Signature]
Protector of Emigrants.

Dr Kamlesh Sharma is a Barrister & Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Australian Capital Territory and the High Court of Australia. Born in Korovuto, Nadi, he finished his primary education at Korovuto Primary and secondary education at Korovuto Secondary and Sangam College in Nadi.

Dr Sharma now lives in Canberra with his family and is the author and publisher of KPS Publications. His first book 'Indigenous Governance' was released in November 2005 which became the reason for the birth of KPS Publications. Dr Sharma's second book focused mainly on Fiji with 'Rahul's Road: Memories of Fijindian Childhood' and was released in July 2007. His third book 'Gulaami: Slavery in Fiji' will be released during 2009.

Dr Sharma can be contacted through his web www.kpspublications.com or e-mail kamlesh@kpspublications.com