

Discovering Indian Roots

[Paper series Part 2 of 3] by Dr Kamlesh Sharma, Canberra.
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Author's note:

This is the second 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. The first paper of this series was written on 3 May 2009. The guidance and recommendations are 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

In Part 1 of the paper, I went through the process involved in obtaining the right immigration pass of the ancestors after having done some basic but crucial research with family elders, capturing the vital data and then travelling to National Archives in Suva.

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

So now you have the immigration pass of your ancestors...

What's Next?

Finding the immigration pass does not mean that one can jump on the plane and arrive into India to find the village and relatives and then fly back. I strongly recommend that individuals don't even think of this but plan things properly.

Have patience and take your time and your efforts will pay off. I have been through the process without any input from my elders because no one is interested neither do they have time as everyone is busy in making money.

At this stage, you need to open a file and start putting crucial information on it for future reference. Keep it updated with every bit of information that you consider crucial in your search for the ancestral village.

The very first thing to do is to examine the immigration pass itself and get to understand it. This is very crucial to the entire process. At the National Archives itself, you will find pictures and articles on *Girmitiyas*.

Try and get copies of it so that you can have a good understanding of the processes adopted by the British and the recruiting agents in bringing Indians to Fiji.

A very useful site with lots of relevant information (which I did not have access to during my research) is www.girmitunited.org

COLONIAL EMIGRATION FORM No. 44.

**MAN'S
EMIGRATION PASS.**

6712.
HEALTH CLASS.

DEPÔT No. 22
For Ship Hereford PROCEEDING TO FIJI.
No. 18

Fiji Emigration Agency.
CALCUTTA, the 14/2 1888.

PARTICU-
LARS OF
REGISTRA-
TION { Place..... Lyzabad
Date 19/4/88
Register No..... 839

Name, Kobair Singh
Father's name, Podaruth Singh
Age, 22
Caste, Thakur
Name of next-of-kin, Bro: Bulbhusur
If married, name of wife,.....
District, Azamgarh
Thana, Sarai Mir
Village or Town & Mahalla..... Phulphore
Bodily Marks, Scar left calf
Height, 5 Feet 5 Inches.

CERTIFIED that we have examined and passed the abovenamed man as fit to emigrate; that he is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that he has been vaccinated since engaging to emigrate.

DATED 19/4/88 The Surgeon Superintendent. Depôt Surgeon.

CERTIFIED that the man 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 him all matters concerning his engagement and duties. This has also been done by the registering officer appointed by the Indian Government at the time of registration.

DATED 19/4/88 The Emigration Agent for Fiji.

PERMITTED to proceed as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to Fiji.
DATED 19/4/88 The Protector of Emigrants.

Immigration Pass

Give the immigration pass the respect it needs as some of us may be seeing it as the only belonging of our ancestors specially myself when I had not seen them personally.

Understand the pass and start some research on it. First look at the date of the pass (it may be early 1880s to early 1900s) and this would allow you to get a perspective of the time involved in terms of separation of the ancestor from homeland India.

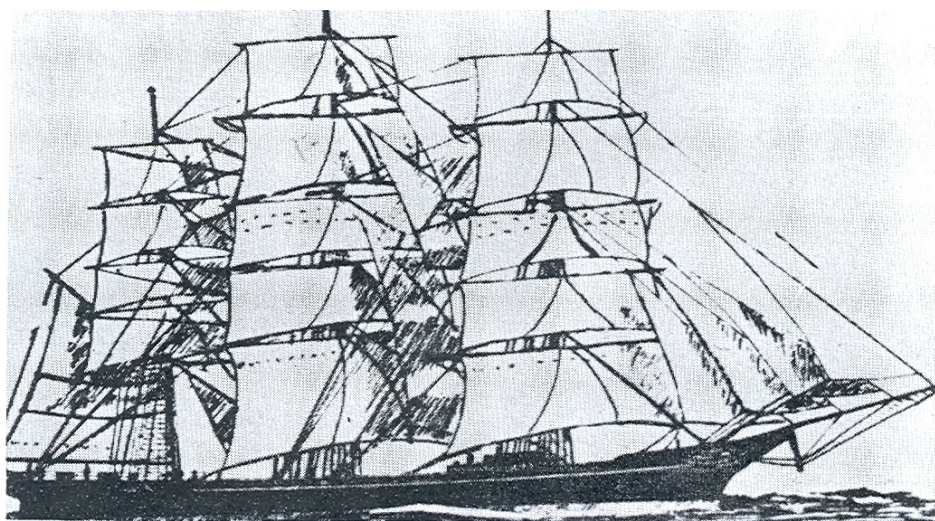
Name of the Ship

Look at the name of the ship on the immigration pass. Do some research on the name by visiting websites like www.girmitunited.org

Feel free to contact Vanita Nair whose contact details are listed on this web site. She is a very lovely person and always willing to assist others.

Also try and search on Google (www.google.com) by the ship name if you need further details and perhaps a picture of the ship. Most were owned by the British and used to cart Cattles and other animals among the British Colonies but were transformed overnight to bring our ancestors to Fiji.

Most ships were overcrowded in a bid to take as many *Girmitiyas* as possible, a clear infringement of the shipping laws at the time or shall I say no valid laws existed as far as *Girmitiyas* were concerned. They only existed on paper to serve the interests of the British Empire.



The first LEONIDAS arrived in Fiji on May 15, 1879.

Registration Depot

Consider the particulars of registration on the immigration pass that shows the name of the depot such as Faizabad which is next to Ayodhya, birthplace of Lord Ram.



Do a Google search on the depot area in a bid to know the locality and to find out if there are any old structures of the depot still available. Use Google Earth (<http://earth.google.com>) as well which is a fantastic tool available free of charge.

Get to know the area and its surroundings and put it in the overall context of India as a country.

I recommend access to a good atlas of India (which is available in all bookshops) so that you can visualise the area from various aspects such as:

- looking at the map of India itself,
- then moving down to the State level such as Uttar Pradesh and
- then local district levels such as Faizabad.

Name of Next of Kin

This is a very important piece of information as it normally includes the name of the ancestors' close relative which in many cases are elder brother, uncle or someone else still living in the village back in India at the time of the migration to Fiji.

With the passing of time (in many cases over 130 years now), there is a high likelihood that siblings of the next of kin are still living in the village and the next of kin name will be very helpful down the track.

District

Note the name of the district as noted on the pass. The good thing to note is that all districts as shown on immigration passes still exist in India, so do a good research and get familiar with its surroundings.

There are heaps information on the Internet regarding the districts. Some examples are the Basti District that has a website with crucial information at <http://basti.nic.in/> while Faizabad district has its website at <http://faizabad.nic.in/>



Thana (Police Station)

The name of the police station shown as *Thana* is also important, as the village from where the ancestors came from, was under that particular *Thana* at the time.

You can Google on the name of the Thana to get some vital information about it such as where exactly it is located and who the officer in-charge is including some telephone contacts.

Now, do not place too much reliance on the *Thana* as the villages in India have been redistributed several times among various *Thanas* in the District. However, it is good to know the name of the original name.



[Kalwari Police Thana: District of Basti]



[Officers in charge of Kalwari Police Thana with Dr Sharma on right]

Village

This is the most crucial piece of information and the most difficult to verify remotely. The best advice at this stage would be to get its spelling right and put it in the right context. Some of the hand writing of the British filling in the immigration pass is not very clear so care must be taken to get the correct spelling.

I have found out the British were very fond of writing wrong names such as villages with names of 'Phulpur' were recorded on the immigration pass as 'Phulfone'. One can search until the cows come home for the 'Phulfone' village.

Once you are able to firm the name of the village, try Google search to see if you can discover some information on the village.

I tried this for my Nani's village and after a lengthy search, I came across some recent newspaper articles in India that mentioned the village and the District. This gave me some assurance that the village actually existed.



[A village house in the District of Basti]

Getting the wrong village name can be painful down the track as you will end up in the wrong village as has happened to me in the district of Basti. This led to losing crucial time in getting to the right village, resulting in less time being available to spend in the correct village and with the new found relatives.

Some villages are in remote areas and there is real difficulty in accessing them due to poor road infrastructures in place. Many can only be accessed by four wheel drive vehicles and it I highly recommended by the local authorities to undertake both sides

of the journey in broad daylight. If you are making a day trip, the actual time to be spent in the village is reduced (to allow enough time to get back before sun set).



[A typical footpath to a remote village in India]

Next Steps

Once you have had a chance to familiarise yourself with the immigration pass, have done the basic homework by researching on relevant topics through recommended web sites and Google search, you are now prepared to move to the most challenging and exciting phase of your project.

This important and final phase will be covered in my next final paper in the series on this topic!

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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 Fijiindian Childhood' and was released in July 2007. His third book 'Gulaami: Slavery in Fiji' will be released during 2009.

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