

Contributions of Tamils to the Composite Culture of Asia



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Indian Emigration into Fiji Plantations (1879 – 1922)

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The campaign against slavery and its eventual abolition in Europe coincided with the ruin of Indian peasantry and the artisan class, particularly weavers. The overwhelmingly redundant labour available in India by the first quarter of 19th century prompted the European planters to consider India a favourable recruiting ground for plantation labour to work in the other parts of the empire. The emigration of Indians into Fiji commenced in 1879. The British colonizers had established sugarcane plantations in the island. Due to the non-availability of local labourers for doing the manual labour in the plantations they approached the British Indian government for availing cheap labour force. The Colonial Government of India accepted their demand and through Act XXI of 1883 included Fiji in the list of countries for the Indian labourers' emigration.

The objective of this paper is to study the emigration of labour from the Madras Presidency to Fiji in the 19th and 20th centuries. Starting with tracing the history of the Fiji Islands, it goes on to highlight the emigration of indentured labourers from India, particularly from Madras Presidency, to Fiji up to the first quarter of the 20th century and portrays the coolies' painful working conditions in the host country.

Geographical Features

Fiji is a small island country, situated in the Southern Pacific Ocean.¹ The Fijian group numbers 250 islands, of which about 80 are inhabited. One of the two main islands and the largest in the group, Vitilevu, covers 4,053 square miles. The next in size is Vanualevu, which covers 2,128 square miles. The island of Rotuma is a dependency of Fiji. The total area of the Fiji Island is 7,083 square miles, of which a major part is steep and mountainous. Suva, the capital, is situated on the island of Vitilevu and is 1,743 miles distant from Australia.²

The average temperature is about 76° F over the year for the islands as a whole. The temperature in Suva shoots from a minimum of 68° F in July to a