

About Fiji

History

According to Fijian legend, the great chief Lutunasobasoba led his people across the seas to the new land of Fiji. Most authorities agree that people came into the Pacific from Southeast Asia via the Malay Peninsula. Here the Melanesians and the Polynesians mixed to create a highly developed society long before the arrival of the Europeans.



The European discoveries of the Fiji group were accidental. The first of these discoveries was made in 1643 by the Dutch explorer, Abel Tasman and English navigators, including Captain James Cook who sailed through in 1774, and made further explorations in the



18th century.

Major credit for the discovery and recording of the islands went to Captain William Bligh who sailed through Fiji after the mutiny on the *Bounty* in 1789.

The first Europeans to land and live among the Fijians were shipwrecked sailors and runaway convicts from the Australian penal settlements. Sandalwood traders and



missionaries came by the mid 19th century.

Cannibalism practiced in Fiji at that time quickly disappeared as missionaries gained influence. When Ratu Seru Cakobau accepted Christianity in 1854, the rest of the country soon followed and tribal warfare came to an end.

From 1879 to 1916 Indians came as indentured labourers to work on the sugar plantations. After the indentured system was abolished, many stayed on as independent farmers and businessmen. Today they comprise 43.6 per cent of the population.

Culture

Fiji was first settled about three and a half thousand years ago. The original inhabitants are now called "Lapita people" after a distinctive type of fine pottery they produced, remnants of which have been found in practically all the islands of the Pacific, east of New Guinea, though not in eastern Polynesia. Linguistic evidence suggests that they came from northern or central Vanuatu, or possibly the eastern



Solomons.

Before long they had moved further on, colonizing Rotuma to the north, and Tonga and Samoa to the east. From there, vast distances were crossed to complete the settlement of the Pacific to Hawaii in the north, Rapanui (Easter Island) in the east and Aotearoa (New Zealand) in the south.

Unlike the islands of Polynesia which showed a continuous steadily evolving culture from initial occupation, Fiji appears to have undergone at least two periods of rapid culture change in prehistoric times.

This may have been due to the arrival of fresh waves of immigrants, presumably from the west. Prehistorians have noted that a massive 12th century volcanic eruption in southern Vanuatu coincides with the disappearance there of a certain pottery style, and its sudden emergence in Fiji.

It is hardly surprising then, that the Fijian culture is an intricate network and that generalisations are fraught with danger. Although the legendary king of Bau, Naulivou, and his successors had control over a large area of eastern Fiji, at no time before colonisation was Fiji a political unity. Nevertheless, Fiji does exhibit certain traits that set it apart from its neighbours, and it is this that defines a distinctive Fijian culture.

Europeans

Fijians first impressed themselves on European consciousness through the writings of the members of the expeditions of Cook who met them in Tonga. They were described as formidable warriors and ferocious cannibals, builders of the finest vessels in the Pacific, but not great sailors.

They inspired awe among the Tongans, and all their manufactures, especially bark-cloth and clubs, were highly esteemed and much in demand. They called their home Viti, but the Tongans called it Fisi, and it is by this foreign pronunciation, Fiji, first promulgated by Cook, that these islands are now known.



After the explorers, other Europeans followed. For over half a century, Fijian culture enjoyed what has been called its 'golden age', as tools and weapons brought by traders were turned by resourceful chiefs to their own advantage.

Canoes and houses were built, confederations formed and wars fought on a grand scale without precedent. Gradually and inevitably, however, the Fijian way of life was changing. As Christianity spread in the islands, wars ceased abruptly and western clothing was adopted.

After Fiji was ceded to Great Britain in 1874, epidemics nearly wiped out the population and it seemed as if the natives were doomed. But the colonial government took the Fijians side.

Land sales were forbidden, health campaigns implemented and the population picked up again. Theirs was not, of course, the culture of the heathen 'golden age', but one modified by the new religion and increasingly the new economic order. Yet in today's Fiji, independent since 1970, a surprising amount has survived.

20th Century

The 20th century brought about important economic changes in Fiji as well as the maturation of its political system. Fiji developed a major sugar industry and established productive copra milling, tourism and secondary industries.

As the country now diversifies into small-scale industries, the economy is strengthened and revenues provide for expanded public works, infrastructure, health, medical services and education.



The country's central position in the region has been strengthened by recent developments in sea and air communications and transport. Today, Fiji plays a major role in regional affairs and is recognized as the focal point of the South Pacific.

Fiji is now home to many other races — Indians, Part Europeans, Chinese and other Pacific islanders living in harmony, and keeping their own cultures and identity. Fijians, slightly over 50 per cent of the total population, are essentially members of communities. They live in villages and do things on a communal basis.

The Indians have also regarded Fiji as their home. Most of them are descendants of labourers brought to the country from India to work in the sugar plantations about 100 years ago under the indentured labour system.



Although they were offered passages back in to India after their term, most preferred to

stay. And through the years they have continued to work the land, becoming prominent in agriculture and also commerce. There has been some intermarriage, but this has been minimal.

However, Indians living in the rural areas have adapted well, some even speaking the local dialect and mixing well with the Fijians. As a country, Fiji is rural based with about 60 per cent of the population living in the rural areas.

Religion

A multi-racial, multi-cultural nation, Fiji is represented by all the major religions of the world. This is quickly obvious to the visitor who will see Christian churches, Mosques, Sikh and Hindu temples in towns and the countryside. More than half of Fiji's population are Christians (52.9%), Hindus (38.1%), Muslim (7.8%), Sikhs (0.7%), Others (0.5%).

Race Relations

Race relations in Fiji are generally harmonious. The Compact provision in the Constitution requires that full account are to be taken of the interests of all communities. It is unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of colour, race or ethnic origins and it is an offence to incite racial disharmony.

Language

English is the lingua franca, but Fijian and Hindi are also taught in schools as part of the school curriculum. Indigenous Fijians have their own dialects and you can tell where one comes from, from their dialect. Indians too have their own, and generally speak a distinctive Fiji-Hindi dialect. This is not the same as the one spoken in India.