Hindus in Fiji and the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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From the early to mid-1900s, efforts were made to evangelize the Indian population in Fiji through education.

Introduction

Under British rule, many Indians were indentured to work on plantations in Mauritius and Trinidad. Furthermore, some
60,000 were recruited from 1874 through 1914 to work for 10 cents a day in the Fijian sugar, cotton, and copra industries. Each individual signed a five-year contract. When it expired, they could stay a further five years to earn a free passage back to India, but many chose to remain in Fiji. By 1912 there were 45,000 who had chosen to adopt Fiji as their home. They worked as subsistence farmers, storekeepers, government clerks, and laborers. The government did not feel obliged to provide education for the Indian children, leaving the responsibility to Roman Catholic and Methodist missionries, who began schools for them in 1898. Hindu, Sikh, and Moslem parents were keen for their children to obtain a basic education that would attract an income, but they resisted any proselytizing. Hindus, in general, were complacent toward Christianity, comfortable in the fact that they were members of an older faith and therefore part of a religion they believed was superior.

**Entry of the Seventh-day Adventist Mission**

Despite the well-known resistance of Hindus to Christianity, the director of the Fiji Mission, Elder Andrew Stewart, and the president of the Australasian Union Conference (AUC), Elder John Fulton, moved to evangelize them. It was, therefore, voted at the 1912 AUC Council that Ellen Meyers pioneer some mission work among the Indians. Meyers was well suited for the task; having been born and raised in India, she was conversant with the Hindi and Urdu languages and the customs of the people.

Meyers sailed from Australia and arrived in Fiji in October 1912, when she rented a unit in Toorak, suburban Suva. She began by opening a night school of five students on the verandah of her home. Numbers increased to the point where it became essential to relocate and establish her efforts in larger quarters.

In 1914 a property was acquired at Samabula (otherwise Somabula) on the northern edge of Suva, and a home and school were erected there. The Toorak school was closed on June 22, enrollment having reached approximately 15 students from middle-class families. During the first year at Samabula, 14 boys were enrolled. The following year, Alfred and Lillian Chesson arrived as assistants. Alfred spent much time learning the Hindi language. Lillian was a nurse and treated some ailing folk in the neighboring Indian settlements. Unfortunately, the Chessons were transferred to India after less than 12 months in Fiji. The 1915 school year finished with 24 students enrolled. In 1917 the number rose to 50.

**First Baptisms**

After more than five years at her mission post, Meyers took furlough in Australia in 1918 to recover from ill health. Her son, Dudley, replaced her. In a mid-1918 report, he spoke of three young men who had recently been baptized. To avoid adverse publicity, the baptism had taken place offshore near the Buresala School. The candidates were two Hindus, named Suchit and Ram Khalon, and a Moslem, named Abdul Rahim. Further baptisms were held, and a Fijian-Indian church with 12 members was organized back in Toorak where the mission had first begun. Ellen Meyers returned in 1920 from her extended furlough together with her son Harold, who replaced Dudley Meyers. It marked the closure of Samabula, and the transfer of school activities back to Toorak. Ellen conducted a school for 20 girls. Cyril and Dora Palmer were new recruits who taught both day and night schools for 70 boys. In that same year, it was reported that three girls were baptized members, one being Rebecca, who was raised by Ellen Meyers from childhood. These individuals were significant because, once having declared their Christianity, they found themselves in a very small circle of potential spouses if they wanted to marry within their new faith.

**Some Consolidation**

In 1922 Ram Khalon (alias Jimmie Ramkhelewan), one of the first Hindus to be baptized in Fiji, was also the first to be listed as a missionary among his own people. Nellie Singh did some secretarial training at the Australasian Missionary College and returned to mission employment at the close of 1922. Na Bahadur Singh was sponsored to do some study in India, and on his return in 1925, he served in the Fiji Mission. By 1933, more converts had joined mission employment, such as Paul and Jack Ramswarup and Balwant and Bakshish Singh. These small tokens were encouraging signs that the mission among Fijian Indians could eventually become self-sufficient.

George Masters arrived in Fiji in 1922 under appointment to assist Ellen Meyers in the school enterprise. Later, his wife, May, wrote of nursing sick Indians in the community. They gave many years of service among the Fijian Indians. When the school was relocated again to Samabula in 1926/27, George was placed in charge of the young men in training, and Ellen Meyers devoted her time to the young ladies until she retired in February 1928. This second period at Samabula was on a larger scale than previously; the 100-acre property was utilized for fruit and vegetable crops to feed the students at the coeducational boarding facility.
These advances arose from an Australian headquarters’ assessment of progress, 1912 through 1923. Church officials declared that “the results so far are not encouraging,” but even though “this work is a most difficult one, yet we should not therefore shun it.” In addition to the expansion of the school work at Samabula, part of the remedy was sought in the appointment of Elder Edmund Rudge to be the superintendent of the mission and concentrate on visitation and the giving of Bible studies. Eighteen months later, at the 1926 Australasian Union Conference Session, the Fiji-Indian Mission was formed. These organizational steps did not yield significant results. The short-lived Fiji-Indian Mission was last mentioned in the 1927 Seventh-day Adventist yearbook.

Struggle Time

Narain Singh, who had done some training at the Australasian Missionary College, returned to teach at Samabula in 1929. In 1932 the mission opened a second school for Indians at Bua on the island of Vanua Levu, but it was closed two years later because mission administrators did not think the expenses warranted the low number of converts. Another school was established at Rambulu on the west coast of Viti Levu. Karl Brooks came to take charge of it, but, once again, its closure in 1948 was prompted by operating costs balanced against an impatience due to few converts. For the same reasons, the Samabula property was sold to the government during World War II so that it could be utilized as a military base. The Indian community found a wealthy benefactor who donated property near Samabula, and the mission agreed to establish another school for them. The enrollment reached over two hundred, but the venture was closed in 1954 because of, once again, the low number of converts.

When Fulton Training School (later Fulton College) was established on Viti Levu during the war years, an Indian Department was opened soon after to cater to both elementary and academy levels in addition to teacher and ministerial training. These provisions existed until 1949, when they were amalgamated with the classes for Fijians and other Pacific islanders. In the 1950s, Indian teachers such as Narain Singh, Paul Ramswarup, Babu Ram Sharma, and Ram Brij were included on the staff.

Where there were small communities of baptized members, the Indian and Fijian adherents would worship together. As the number of Indian converts increased, they formed their own churches, especially in the larger towns. Some contemporary congregations on the main island of Viti Levu are located at Nasinu and Nausori to the northeast of Suva, Nadi, Lautoka and Ba on the west coast, and Navua on the south coast. On the island of Vanua Levu, churches are functioning at Savusavu, Taveuni, and Labasa.

Conclusion

Brij, who was a student at Samabula and a teacher at both Samabula and Fulton Training School, observed that when the expatriates returned to Australia, mission work among the Indian population “came to a standstill.” Many young people who had converted to Christianity, he lamented, were not nurtured and fell away from the mission. However, writing later, during his retirement years, he expressed a brighter picture and noted in 2001 that there were “more local Indian ministers than ever before sharing the Adventist message.”

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NOTES


15. “You will be glad . . . .” Australasian Record, January 12, 1920, 8.


23.


29. Ibid.


32. Shiu Kumar, e-mail message to Milton Hook, November 5, 2019.