

From margins to mainstream: How Kiwi-Indians helped shape modern New Zealand

by Gaurav Sharma, senior journalist at Radio New Zealand

In this talk, we trace the long and often overlooked history of Indian New Zealanders and reflects on how that story continues to shape our national identity.

Many believe the story of Indians in New Zealand is a recent one, perhaps defined only by modern migration or the local dairy.

In truth, the tale of Indian New Zealanders is woven into the very fabric of our national history. From the first colonial ships in the 1700s and the trenches of Gallipoli, to the Waikato dairy farms and Pukekohe market gardens, the footprint is deep.

Early pioneers weren't doctors or IT specialists; they were hardy men who undertook the gruelling labour of clearing scrub, digging drains, and flax milling, thus laying the literal foundations of our provinces.

While the 'Indian Dairy' later became a cultural cliché, it was actually a lifeline for families to survive and thrive in a land where other doors were often closed.

Today, the 'Kiwi-Indian' identity is far from a monolith.

Spanning from fourth-generation descendants to new arrivals, the community has grown from just six individuals in 1881 to six percent of our population today.

Now the third-largest ethnicity, Indian New Zealanders are among the nation's most prosperous, earning 20 percent more than the median income.

It is a story of resilience, adaptation and eventual triumph - an evolution from invisible pioneers to a cornerstone of New Zealand's national identity.

Further reading and viewing

Books

- Jacqueline Leckie. *Invisible: New Zealand's History of Excluding Kiwi-Indians*. Massey University Press, 2021.
- Sekhar Bandyopadhyay & Jane Buckingham (eds). *Indians and the Antipodes: Networks, Boundaries, and Circulation*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Robert E. Bartholomew. *No Māori Allowed: New Zealand's Forgotten History of Racial Segregation*. Bartholomew Publishing, 2020.

- New Zealand Indian Central Association. *Mokaa: The Land of Opportunity — 125 Years of Indians in New Zealand*. NZICA, 2018.
- W. H. McLeod. *Punjabis in New Zealand: A History of Punjabi Migration 1890–1940*. 1988.

Documentaries

- *Punjab to Aotearoa*. Directed by Gagan Sandhu, presented by Harjot Singh, NZ Punjabi Multimedia Trust / Radio Spice, 2025.
- *Lotus in the Long White Cloud*. Produced and directed by Roy Kaunds and Ajay Vasisht for NZICA, releasing 2026.

Selected RNZ stories

- Historical discrimination of Kiwi Indians in spotlight (4 March 2026)
- Tracing the history of Indian migration to New Zealand (21 November 2024)
- Tracing the century-old legacy of Indian participation in NZ's dairy industry (22 August 2024)
- The 'Indo-Pacific bookends' seeking to land on common ground (20 March 2025)
- Indian population leapfrogs Chinese to become third-largest ethnicity (7 October 2024)

Archives to visit

- Te Papa Tongarewa — Cuba Photographic Studio collection (over 100 plus portraits of early Indian immigrants, 1930s–40s).
- Auckland War Memorial Museum — online cenotaph identifies 71 Chinese and 17 Indian WWI ANZACs (display unveiled April 2023).
- Waiouru Army Museum — medals of Santa Singh Johal, wounded at Gallipoli 1915.
- New Zealand Indian Central Association — community archive used in Mokaa (2018).

A short timeline, 1769 to 2026

The early arrivals (1769–1920)

- 1769** Mahmud Qasim and Nasrin land in Northland on the French ship Saint Jean Baptiste — the same month Cook is leaving New Zealand waters.
- 1809** An Indian sailor jumps ship in the Bay of Plenty, marries a Māori woman, settles — the first recorded Indian New Zealander.
- 1853** Edward “Black Peter”, Anglo-Indian from Goa, arrives in Otago via the California gold fields.
- 1881** Six Indians are recorded in the New Zealand Census.
- 1890** Brothers Bir and Phuman Singh Gill arrive: the first known Punjabis.
- 1902** Keshaw Daji, “probably the first Gujarati” to settle in New Zealand.
- 1915** Santa Singh Johal of the 58th Vaughan’s Rifles (Frontier Force) is wounded at Gallipoli; emigrates to New Zealand in 1920.
- 1918** Harnam Singh buys a 50-acre farm near Kihikihi: the first Punjabi dairy farm in the country.

Exclusion and resistance (1920–1950)

- 1920** Immigration Restriction Amendment Act targets “Asiatic” entrants. Auckland Indian Association founded — the first Indian community organisation in the country.
- 1925** White New Zealand League holds its inaugural meeting. Wellington Indian Association founded by Ravjbhai Hira.
- 1926** The three regional associations join forces to form the New Zealand Indian Central Association (NZICA).
- 1933** A petition with 1,456 signatures demands the deportation of all “Asiatics”. Motiram Wallabh sues the Pukekohe cinema for racial segregation — and wins damages.

The community arrives (1950–1990)

- 1953** Nehru Hall opens in Pukekohe.
- 1955** Gandhi Hall opens on Victoria Street, Auckland.
- 1958** Immigration reform: New Zealand-born Indian women can finally sponsor husbands from overseas. Families begin arriving in numbers.
- 1965** The Dhyan Chand Trophy is contested at the King’s Birthday Hockey Tournament for the first time.
- 1970** Hardial Singh Deo arrives with \$2 in his pocket. Daulat Singh Bindra buys his first dairy farm in Gordonton.
- 1988** W.H. McLeod publishes Punjabis in New Zealand.
- 1989** The Mahatma Gandhi Centre opens at 145 New North Road, Auckland (the former Findlay’s Bakery).

Third-largest ethnicity (1990–2026)

- 1991** A new Immigration Act opens the door more widely; the surge in Indian migration begins.
- 2002** Helen Clark apologises to the Chinese community for the Poll Tax.
- 2021** Jacinda Ardern apologises to Pacific communities for the Dawn Raids.
- 2023** Census records 292,092 people of Indian descent (+22% since 2018) — overtaking Chinese to become New Zealand’s third-largest ethnic group.
- 2025** Nikhil Ravishankar becomes CEO of Air New Zealand; racist online backlash forces NZ Herald, RNZ and 1News to disable comments.
- 2025** New Zealand–India free trade agreement negotiations conclude.
- 2026** NZICA centenary calls for a government apology to Kiwi-Indians for historical racism.