



The Voyage of the *Leonidas*

There is a grand opening in the colony after the indentures are out as [the indentured labourer] can set up as a cow keeper, market gardener, and poulterer, there being no industries of this description amongst the Fijians, nor ever I imagine likely to be.

William Seed, Agent General of Immigration

The *Leonidas* was the first of 87 ships that transported over 60,000 Indian indentured migrants to Fiji between 1879 and 1916. The 1,600 ton vessel, which belonged to James Nourse, one of the two shipping contractors to the Fiji government, had been operating to the West Indies for some years, and was specially fitted for the labour trade.

On 28 January 1879, *Leonidas* cleared the port of Calcutta, carrying around 500 migrants, bound for Fiji.

Only three days after leaving the Hoogly, cholera and smallpox broke out on the vessel. Cholera struck a European sailor first, and soon spread to the migrants. The Surgeon Superintendent, Dr J. Welsh, acted quickly.

The stricken sailor was placed in a tent at the forecastle head, with a man to attend him. All his clothing and other possessions were thrown overboard, and the forecastle head was constantly washed with carbolic acid. Migrants with cholera were kept in the hospital under strict surveillance, while those struck by smallpox were restricted to the only spare place on the ship, the sail locker. The between decks, hospitals and privies were also thoroughly disinfected, whitewashed and fumigated. The diet for all on board was lowered, and children were dosed with castor oil, laudanum and rum, and fed on arrowroot and sago for four or five days.¹ Despite all the precautions, 19 lives were lost, a mortality rate of 3.80 percent, well above the average of one percent for the whole period of indentured migration to Fiji.

For most of the migrants who had never seen, let alone boarded, a sailing ship before, the journey was traumatic, the physical discomfort of crowded quarters, stench and seasickness demoralizing. Old standards of conduct, guides to action, values of obedience, respect and status, and an appreciation of one's defined position in an established hierarchy all proved inadequate and painfully irrelevant. For the more sensitive among the migrants who tried to make sense of their altered situation, there was little time for reflection or self pity. There was work to be done, even on the ship. A typical day began at 6.00 a.m., when the migrants rose, arranged their bedding and breakfasted between 8.00 and 8.30 a.m. while the between deck was being cleaned by *topazes*. The men helped draw water for cooking and drinking, while the women worked in the kitchen, although food itself was cooked by *bhandarries* appointed by the Surgeon Superintendent. When not working, the migrants were encouraged to enjoy themselves by wrestling, playing cards, singing and playing drums, to prevent depression and melancholy. The voyage fostered a sense of community among the migrants, irrespective of their social positions in India: they were 'coolies' all. The sense of comradeship formed during the crossing endured. Years after their *girmit* had expired, the indentured labourers would hobble long distances on foot to meet their *jahajibhais* (ship mates) and reminisce over the shared ordeals of the voyage.

The *Leonidas* arrived off the port of Levuka on the island of Ovalau on the evening of 14 May 1879, but because of the inexperience of the captain with Fiji waters, encroaching darkness and the presence of sharp coral reefs nearby, it was unable to enter the harbour.² The news of its arrival having reached the government within a few hours, J.B. Thurston, the Colonial Secretary, went early the next day in an open boat to warn the captain of the dangerous passage to the harbour. As he approached the vessel, the

Surgeon Superintendent shouted that there had been cholera and smallpox aboard. This was alarming news, for only a few years earlier an epidemic of measles had killed 40,000 of the 160,000 Fijians. Without lingering to learn the exact nature of the disaster, which in any case was difficult because of the deafening noise from the breakers, Thurston reported the news to the acting Governor, George William Des Voeux. After hurried consultations, Dr William MacGregor, the Chief Medical Officer, was sent to obtain further particulars. He reported that although the dreaded cholera had abated some time ago, the most recent cases of smallpox had appeared just a few days before the vessel entered Fiji waters.

The Governor was sufficiently concerned that he even considered sending the *Leonidas* back on the high seas without unloading the migrants. He wrote to Sir Michael Hicks of the Colonial Office in London:

Had it been possible to ensure that the vessel, if prevented from entering the harbour, would leave the group altogether without touching anywhere or receiving any visits from natives or others, it might have become a question of whether she should not be sent away, even at the imminent risk to 500 lives, rather than that 100,000 lives should be subject to danger scarcely less grave. But having no man-of-war at hand or other means of prevention, it would be almost certain that the ship, if sent away, would put at one of the many islands lying in any course which could be taken for leaving the Colony, and in that case, while the 500 would perhaps have been sacrificed, the 100,000 would have been in still greater jeopardy.³

The course of Fijian history might have been different had he turned the ship away. But the officials agreed that the *Leonidas* should be brought inside the barrier reef, and anchored in the harbour to the leeward of the town. As the ship was being brought in through the reef, a further disaster caused anxiety: the *Leonidas* ran aground. Fortunately, in about two hours the ship floated on the rising tide, and soon afterwards found anchor in more placid waters of Levuka harbour.

As it was vitally important to prevent any contact between those aboard the *Leonidas* and the shore, a large and fully armed schooner was placed between the two. Three other boats, each containing three men, patrolled an area inside the reef up to 350 yards from the *Leonidas*. The guards, drawn from the armed constabulary and the police, were given express orders to shoot, after warning, anyone who might attempt to break the quarantine. Two more Europeans were provided with a boat and crew to make regular visits to the guards by night and day to prevent any laxity in vigilance. On one occasion Des Voeux himself visited the guards, and finding one of

them asleep, ordered him flogged.

Meanwhile there arose the question of finding a satisfactory quarantine depot for all the migrants. Yanuca Lailai, a tiny island of about 100 acres, had already been chosen, and houses built to accommodate about 350 people. To accommodate the extra 150 people, the Governor levied the people of Moturiki and Ovalau, and by 20 May, only two days after the order had been given, 700 Fijian men were sent to Yanuca Lailai to construct twenty more Fijian *bures*. The necessary materials had already been collected from the forest and shipped to the island. The Fijians worked with 'extraordinary activity' and within three days the task was completed, together with a hospital, storehouse, and quarters for the depot keeper. Later thirty more houses were added for married couples and others with families.

Now the officials were faced with the greatest difficulty of all: transferring the migrants from the ship to the depot. Taking the infected *Leonidas* to Yanuca Lailai was deemed hazardous. Guards had to be posted all along the coast of Ovalau, to prevent contact between the migrants and the shore. Most of the available forces had already been deployed to keep a watch on the *Leonidas*, whose crew thought the colonial authorities overzealous, even refusing to cooperate with them. The Governor therefore approached Roko TuiTailevu (Ratu Abel, the eldest son of Cakobau) for men, and he readily obliged by sending an armed contingent of fifty. Precautionary measures taken, the tedious process of transfer began twelve days after the *Leonidas* had arrived in Levuka. The migrants had to be transported in rowing boats, the only craft available, and each boat could make only one trip a day, since the distance between the *Leonidas* and Yanuca Lailai was over ten miles. It took three days for all the migrants to be quarantined on the island. The Governor breathed a sigh of relief when, at the end of the month, the *Leonidas* cleared Fiji waters and headed for San Francisco. Apart from Des Voeux himself, Dr William MacGregor played the most important part in coordinating efforts to bring the immigrants to safety. He was handsomely praised by the Governor for his 'remarkable presence of mind, combined with fertility and readiness of resource . . . [and] his untiring energy and sustained exertion'.⁴ However, MacGregor's hour of glory would come five years later, in 1884, when the *Syria* ran aground on the Nasilai reef (next chapter).

The Fijian people too brought much credit to themselves by their ungrudging cooperation and calm. Cakobau did make an enquiry to the Governor about the two diseases aboard the *Leonidas*, though this perhaps was done at the behest of 'certain whites passing there [who] had not failed

to seize the opportunity for mischief in representing the presence of the smallpox as the natural result of the Government action in introducing coolies'.⁵ The Governor replied that all possible precaution had been taken, saying that the disease had originated with one of the white sailors and not with the Indians who 'were well on leaving Calcutta'. A day before, he had decided on universal vaccination of the Fijians and had sent a long circular on the subject to the *Rokos* of the different provinces urging them to promote the operation.

The migrants remained in quarantine until 15 August.⁶ During this period, 15 more died, mostly from dysentery, diarrhoea and typhoid. The survivors, after a period of convalescence, were brought back to Levuka for allocation among the planters, who showed little interest. Perhaps they were still angry with Gordon who, much against their wishes, had prohibited commercial employment of Fijian labour and had imported Indian labour instead. Only one planter, J. Hill, of Rabi offered to take a total of 52 men, 25 women, and 29 children. Some were taken as domestic servants but by far the greatest number—189 men and 97 women—had to be employed by the government itself on public works.

Table 1⁷
Allotment of the *Leonidas* migrants by Plantation (in 1882)

Name of Employer	Name of Estate/Place	Men	Women	Children	Infants
J.E. Mason	Gila Est, Taveuni	52	28	8	1
J.C. Smith	Viti Est, Viti Levu	43	21	6	-
Sahl & Co.	Muaniweni, Viti Levu	40	20	4	2
CSR	Nausori	43	25	7	1
John Hill	Rabi	50	24	21	4
Colonial Secretary	Suva	4	2	1	-
Police	Rewa	2	1	-	-
Sir John Gorrie	Suva	1	-	-	-
J.B. Hobday	Levuka	-	1	-	-
B. Morris	Levuka	1	-	-	-
Turner & Edgerly	Rewa	1	1	-	-
J. Conelly	Levuka	1	1	-	-
G. Smith	Levuka	2	2	1	-
Govt. House	Nasova	1	-	-	-
Smith	Levuka	-	1	1	-

Source: *The National Archives of India, Emigration Proceedings, April 1882.*

In November 1879, the government temporarily took over the Great Amalgam Estate in Rewa to stamp out a coffee leaf disease which had just appeared in the colony, and transferred 139 men, 58 women, and 18 children there for a year. This move proved to be the turning point in the employment of Indian indentured labour in Fiji. The Indians performed so impressively that four planters, J.E. Mason of Taveuni; and J.C. Smith, Sahl and Company, and H.Z. Baillie, all of Viti Levu, applied for an immediate allotment from this number. The distribution of *Leonidas* immigrants in 1882 is detailed in Table 1.

By the time the migrants reached the plantations, they had already resigned themselves to an uncertain future, and were prepared to accept stoically all that lay in store for them. By now they knew that it was foolhardy to hope for easy money; they would have to toil hard for every pittance. And they did. The planters could allocate labour to time work or task work (*ticca*). At first they tried the former. Soon, however, the overseers were complaining of deliberate time-killing on the part of the labourers, and quickly switched to task work. One official noted that this change 'satisfied master and men much better' but this assertion is questionable. Undoubtedly, there were some who preferred task work, its fleeting sense of independence and self-respect, and lesser chance of the overseer's whip. But this was illusory, for the tasks were tough, and set according to the pleasure of the overseers. Some years later, when the C.S.R. changed from time to task work, it was noted that this had caused 'a great dissatisfaction amongst the labourers'.

From the start, relations between the labourers and the overseers were strained. Misunderstanding, ignorance, prejudice, and sometimes deliberate vindictiveness on the part of those in authority, led to conflict. Very early on, things were especially bad on the Vunicibi Estate on which some *Leonidas* migrants were employed. The manager constantly over-tasked his labour force which, coupled with insufficient wages, led to several complaints, as a result of which the manager was called before the district magistrate and fined. But his behaviour did not improve. Soon afterwards, the enraged labourers set upon him and beat him very severely, for which, five were sentenced to one year and another five to six months imprisonment. All the labourers were subsequently removed from the estate until a new manager was appointed. Tension and violence were not confined to working situations alone; they pervaded the *girmitiya*'s social life as well. The absence of institutionalized patterns of interaction and shared values often placed the labourers under considerable strain. Nevertheless, incidents of murder in the early years were confined to

quarrels over women, for whom there was keen competition. Husbands who sensed infidelity on the part of their wives, were not averse to wielding the cane knife or the axe. In 1879 on Rabi Island, a *Leonidas* migrant hacked his wife's head off with an axe because of a minor alleged moral impropriety on her part. He received 6 years imprisonment. More such gruesome acts would occur in later years.

If *girmit* was *narak* (hell) or *kasbighar* (brothel) as some of the immigrants later recalled, it lasted only for 5 or at the most 10 years, depending upon whether contracts were renewed or extended. Moreover, if it brutalized many, it also provided others with habits of industry and thrift, and an opportunity to improve their lot. Among the most successful of the *Leonidas* migrants was Sohun who was able not only to buy his exemption, but also to deposit a sum of £40 in the local bank. Molladeen was another success: from the pittance of his wages, he had saved up £35. The ethos of *girmit* was clear for everyone: success was to be earned in the competitive open market; it was not divinely preordained as it had seemed in India.

The Indians would be better off once they had left the plantation, or so the government of the day thought. William Seed, the Agent General of Immigration, wrote:

There is a grand opening in the colony after the indentures are out as he [the indentured labourer] can set up as a cow keeper, market gardener, and poulterer, there being no industries of this description amongst the Fijians, nor ever I imagine likely to be. He will also be able to set up as a petty trader, and purvey for his countrymen an occupation much esteemed by old Indian immigrants in other colonies.⁸

Two hundred and ninety of the 450 adults who had come on the *Leonidas* thought differently. At the earliest possible opportunity, they applied for repatriation, and many of them did in fact return to India. Those who stayed behind did so for a variety of reasons. Opportunities for social and economic advancement in Fiji were much better than they could ever have been in India, especially since the government had promised leases of up to 99 years, with generous financial assistance to set up new homesteads in the colony.⁹ The experience of the crossing and life on the plantation had forged new bonds which persuaded many to stay. Some had married across caste lines, and knew that they and their children would never gain social acceptance in the ultra-conservative villages of the Indo-Gangetic plains. For some, it was simple inertia which led them to put off their trip until they had earned enough money to take back.

That day never came for many: time passed and memories of India

faded as the *girmitiyas* struggled with the pressing problems of day-to-day existence in a new life, to which ancestral wisdom was proving frustratingly irrelevant. Well-tryed methods of cultivation were woefully inadequate, tools and implements different, and the soil hard and untamed. Things which had been taken for granted in India—what to plant, when and how— all now posed perplexing problems. There was no *biradari* (brotherhood) and no village *panchayat* (village council) to lean on for advice and assistance. But most struggled on and many achieved at least a modicum of prosperity. The *Leonidas* migrants would have reason to be satisfied with the legacy they bequeathed to their descendants, the new *girmitiyas*.



A typical sugar cane farm of the 1930s and 40s, with thatched houses in the background. Bullocks replaced horses later, followed by tractors.

Endnotes

1. J. Welsh to Dr William MacGregor, 16 May 1879, in Great Britain Parliament. *House of Commons Papers*, XLIV, 1880, 60.
2. The following description of the incidents relating to the *Leonidas* and its immigrants upon reaching Fiji is based on correspondence on the subject published in the *House of Commons Papers*. References will therefore be restricted to direct quotations only.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
5. *House of Commons Papers* XLIV, p. 62.
6. The data in the following paragraph was obtained from the Department of Revenue and Agriculture (Emigration), April 1882, Pros. 90-93, *The National Archives of India*. (NAI)
7. *Ibid.* The name of Baillie is not included in the Table because by 1882 Indian labourers had been withdrawn from his plantation due to his bad treatment of them.
8. *Ibid.*
9. J.B. Thurston to Secretary of State for Colonies, 20 November 1888 in Department of Revenue and Agriculture (Emigration), October 1889, NAI.



Girmitiyas at play. Wrestling or *kusti* was a favourite sport, as late as the 1950s. Other games included *kabbadi* and *gulidanda*. They were later replaced by football.