

YEAR 6 HISTORY: Learning sequence 1

Sikh and Indian Australians

A WHITE AUSTRALIA

HTAWA



The resource was developed by [HTAWA](#), the History Teachers' Association of WA, for the [Sikh Association of Western Australia](#).

YEAR 6 HISTORY: SIKH AND INDIAN AUSTRALIANS

Learning sequence 1: 1901 to 1945 - Was there ever a “White Australia”?

The focus of these Learning sequences is Asian immigration to Australia during the twentieth and early twenty first centuries with a focus on Sikh Australians.

See [Teacher Resource 1: What Sikhs Believe](#).

Activity 1: Asian Australians 1901 -1945

The existence of the original Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people contradicts the notion of a truly “White Australia”. There were also thousands of non-Europeans who lived and worked in Australia during the nineteenth century and the “White Australia” era. Their numbers did decline in the early 1900s, especially in Queensland, with the active deportation of Pacific Islanders, but Chinese, Indians, Malays, Japanese and other people from the Asia-Pacific region continued to live in Australia throughout the years of the “White Australia” policy. Between 1902 and 1946, more than 61,000 Chinese people entered Australia, out of a total of around 108,000 people classified as ‘Asiatic’. Over half of the Chinese made their homes in Australia. While in 1901 an estimated 7637 people born in India resided in Australia, with some sources estimating their numbers remained about 7000 through until the late 1940s.

At the time of Federation most Australians were classed as British subjects, with rights such as equality before the law and free travel between the British colonies. As the British Empire covered many countries across the globe and the majority of the British subjects were Indian, African and Chinese (from Hong Kong and Singapore), the idea of using racial criteria to restrict immigration to any part of the Empire was unacceptable to the British Government. The dilemma for many Australian leaders was that Britain’s policies towards her subjects were seen as too broad, especially as restriction of non-European migrants had been a vital issue leading to Federation. As a consequence the Commonwealth Government created immigration policies to suit the new nation.

1.1 The Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 aimed ‘to place certain restrictions on immigration and to provide for the removal from the Commonwealth of prohibited immigrants’. The insane, people who were ill, were criminals or on work contracts were immediately prohibited. However, Australia side-stepped British criticism by instead of legalising a “colour” test, it imposed a “dictation” test, to keep out immigrants of the “wrong type”. Australia did not invent the Dictation Test but followed the South African state of Natal. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1897 aimed to ‘prevent the importation of coolie labour from India’ using a language test. New Zealand also adopted a similar test in 1899.

Australian Immigration Officers would read out a paragraph of about 50 words to the potential immigrant to write correctly. Initially the test was in the English language, but after 1905 it could be given in “any prescribed language” nominated by the Immigration Officer. From 1902 to 1903 the Dictation Test was given 805 times with 46 people passing, while from 1904-1909 of the 554 people taking the test only six were successful. After 1909 every person who took the test failed.

An example of a Dictation Test passage used in Australia from the 1 to the 15th October, 1925

Water as a liquid concerns us because our lives, like that of other living creatures, whether they be human, animal or vegetable, from the biggest mammoth to the tiniest microbe, are dependent on water. Therefore, so far as we know, where there is no liquid water, there can be no life.

<http://vrrroom.naa.gov.au/records/?ID=18970>

1.2 The following activity provides an understanding of the country of origin of immigrants from Asia during the 1920s.

[Teacher Resource 2: Mapping Migration from Asia](#)

1.3 Who were Australian citizens?

There was no legal Australian citizenship until the Nationality and Citizenship Act of 1948. However, up to 1949 the Australian Government developed three categories of citizenship for non-Aboriginal people in Australia:

- British subjects with permanent residence (including naturalised people) - who had full political rights and were seen as Australian citizens.
- British subjects without permanent residence - had some political rights, but were not categorised as citizens.
- Aliens - who were not citizens, could live in Australia but only under government rules.

For more information type the following into your search engine:

“Guides National Archives of Australia Citizenship, Ch 1 Citizenship - Australia”

What attitudes underlay these three levels of citizenship and Commonwealth Government laws such as the “Immigration Restriction Act”? [Teacher resource 3](#) provides an opportunity to analyse the point of view held by Australian politicians in 1901.

[Teacher Resource 3 - In their own words.](#)

Activity 2: Invisible in a White Australia

2.1 How would you feel? People of Asian heritage had lived and worked in Australia for many decades and suddenly the new laws removed their basic rights to live, work, freely travel and bring their family to Australia! Some examples are included below:

- Pacific Islanders (Kanakas), who worked on the cane fields in northern Queensland, were deported to their homelands by the end of 1908. Some were forced to leave their Australian wives and children behind.
- Wives and children of Asian men already living in Australia were not allowed to stay in Australia after 1903.
- Chinese, Malay, Indian and Afghan men who wished to travel to Asia from Australia to visit families or for business were compelled to apply for a Certificate of Exemption from the Dictation Test (CEDT). These people became “objects to be watched over, administered and controlled”. (Fitzgerald, 2007, p 24)
- Australian born Asian people who travelled overseas could be arrested on return as a “prohibited immigrant” and threatened with deportation.
- Unless given the right to vote at State level, “Aboriginal natives of Australia, Asia, Africa or the Pacific Islands except New Zealand” could not vote in Commonwealth elections.

Australian authorities categorised Indians, although British subjects, as ‘natives of Asia’, who had no automatic entitlement to travel freely between India and Australia and no new immigrants from India were allowed.

What about recognition of the hard work of non-European people who lived in Australia during the 1800s such as cameleers, hawkers, merchants, market gardeners, pearl divers and sugar cane workers?

It was possible for people already resident in Australia in 1901 to apply for a Domicile Certificate and, after 1905, a Certificate of Exemption from the Dictation Test (CEDT). This was like a passport, which allowed the holder to re-enter Australia within three years without taking a dictation test. It carried two photographs of the holder, a profile as well as full-face view and a handprint. Extensions were often granted on application. Residents such as the cameleers, Indian and Chinese hawkers and shopkeepers, as well as the skilled Japanese pearl divers in the Kimberley were able to apply for these certificates. Not everyone who applied for the Certificate received it. An example of a Certificate of Exemption for Braham Singh, a Sikh hawker from Victoria, can be accessed by typing the following into your search engine:

“Australian Indian history certificate of exemption dictation test cedt.”

Many of these Asian residents have been invisible in written histories of a “white” Australia. Yet within the paper trail and much propaganda generated by governments and newspapers, men from the Punjab, India, Singapore, China and other Asian countries lived and worked as camel drivers, hawkers, landowners, shopkeepers and entertainers within the newly Federated nation. In the past their presence was largely ignored as they did not fit the image of “white” Australia. They settled into communities and as people came to know them racist stereotypes diminished. The hard work and generosity of Asian Australians can be discovered in stories, newspaper articles and memories of people they knew.

2.2 Many members of the Sikh community, with their strong sense of Empire, nationalism and military traditions enrolled in the Australian Imperial Forces during World War One. The bravery and loyalty of Sikh Anzacs enhanced respect for them and during the 1920s Sikh Australians were granted property rights, access to pensions and voting rights. The series of sources in [Teacher resource 4](#) provide insights into the contribution of Sikhs during the early twentieth century.

See [Teacher resource 4: Stories of Sikh Australians, source analysis](#)

A Sikh pilot who became well known following World War Two was Manmohan Singh. Why was he famous? Where did he serve during the war? Find answers to these questions by using the following websites.

Type the following into your search engine: Australian Sikh Heritage - flying officer Manmohan Singh.

SBS Punjabi Remembering the unsung Flying Officer Man Mohan Singh

Activity 3: Asian Australians: Living in, working for and bringing change to Western Australia

3.1 The presence of a thriving Asian community in towns like Broome in northern Australia did not conform to the image of a “White Australia”. Laws such as the Western Australian Pearling Act of 1913 ensured that only British citizens could own pearling luggers, but the society comprised Japanese divers, Malay, Koepanger (from the Dutch East Indies), Filipino and Chinese boat crews and Chinese labourers, shopkeepers and cooks, all of whom lived in relative harmony.

A report on the 1914 New Year celebrations in Broome reflects the ethnic mix which characterises the town even today.

“a ... picture of white-clad pearlers, unclad aborigines, half-clad Malays and Filipinos, and gorgeously clad Japanese. For the pearling port is the most cosmopolitan spot in Australasia. And New Year’s Eve! Surely it was the maddest, merriest time the port had ever known ... There was a blaze of bobbing lights, coloured lanterns on long bamboo poles; there was Malay music, with the cymbals dominant; Manilla men’s (Manilla is the capital of the Philippines) music, with a suggestion of old Spain; Chinese music from the joss-house, with the pipes screeching merrily, and Scots music, with ‘Auld Lang Syne’ over and over again.

Sydney Morning Herald, 10 January 1914.

Also See a short film on pearl diving in Broome

<http://aso.gov.au/titles/sponsored-films/through-centre/clip1/>

During this time the Chinese community in Western Australia established the Chung Wah Association. An extract from the Minute Book in April 1909, shows the importance played by the Association in Western Australia.

‘Unity is strength and an Association is vitally necessary. If there is no Association there is conflict and a feeling of not belonging anywhere. The overseas Chinese living in Western Australia are far away from the several thousand strong community in the other states... We are like scattered sand, it is no wonder that the Westerners are bullying us, passing stringent (strict) legislation aimed to displace us. Our countrymen should consider this situation and not ignore their responsibility to the community.’

<http://heritageperth.com.au/properties/chung-wah-hall/>

For more information on the aims and contribution of the Chung Wah Association download the PDF, 100 Years of Chung Wah. Also: <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/chinatowns-across-australia>

In pairs students could find out more information about the multicultural character Broome today or the contribution of the Chung Wah Association to Western Australia during the early 2000s.

3.2 Up to the late 1930s hawkers, often Sikhs from the Punjab, added colour and a welcome presence in rural communities across Australia. Many travelled alone over great distances with just a dog for companionship. The following sources include memories from local residents in some of the Western Australian towns visited by Sikh hawkers.

Nannup

The hawker Ottom Singh regularly visited small South West towns in Western Australia. His visits to Nannup were remembered fondly: “He was one of the more regular hawkers to trade at the Nannup mill settlement and was said to be a most courteous and colourful character... He had a swag of samples [and he would] sell goods from door to door. He is reported as a man who spoke little, but showed his wares skilfully and then politely departed to the next customer. His wares included needles, cottons, scissors, buttons, toiletries etc. There were clothing samples with a difference... the silks held the mill women enthralled, perhaps with an aura of Eastern [mystery]. At night he found a water supply, lit his fire and camped in solitude.”

Nannup Telegraph, July 2015. p.18

Dongara

Ida Lee remembered Sikh visitors during the 1920s when her father was Officer in Charge of the Police Station at Dongara. Note she calls them “Afghans and Asians”.

“There would up to eight in a team and a big caravan - big top vans with about eight wheels. They parked behind the Police Station, behind the big stables, with the camels tied by one ankle. They had their merchandise in the caravan, plus their sleeping accommodation, and everything was so spotlessly clean - the linen they ate off and slept in.

She used to play with their kids. We loved to see the Afghans and the Asians washing their hair of a Saturday morning. Beautiful long white hair, because it was always done with one pin in it, then their turban. To dry their hair properly they’d brush it with their fingers, not brushes.

And when it was all dry they’d coil it all up and twist it round, put one pin in it and start their turban from there. Absolutely lovely, regal. The... Sing [Singh] family would have Johnny Cakes on Sunday morning for their breakfast. Beautiful big flat very fine pancakes, dripping with butter... They were very nice people.”

From an interview with Ida Lee (nee Campbell) reminiscences of Sikh visitors, from Reg Aidkins.

Manjimup

Long before there were shops in Manjimup, two Indian hawkers travelled throughout the lower south west area [of western Australia] in a horse drawn wagon, providing a very welcome service for the settlers. The wagon was well stocked with blankets, dress lengths, cottons, ribbons, shoelaces, wool, needles, socks, trousers, tea, matches, soaps, pocket knives, working boots, slippers and many more items. Herman and Nehal Singh were always warmly welcomed on the farms because of the wares they sold, the skins they bought and because of their kindly nature. Their supplies came from a shop in Cranbrook owned by their brother Sunder Singh.

<http://www.australiansikhheritage.com/nehah-herman-and-sunder-singh/>

Herman and Nahel Singh traded throughout the Albany Bunbury region. Herman died in an accident in 1901 when, driving the wagon, he lost control of one of the horses and the wagon over-turned. Local families remembered the accident and the loss of one of the “gentlemen Hawkers” in their district by building grave surrounded by post and rail on the site where Herman Singh was cremated.



Nahal Singh who regularly travelled to Manjimup after the death of his brother, Herman



1915 Nehal Singh selling goods to Mrs Forrest of “Dwalganup”.
Courtesy of Australian Sikh Heritage Association.

Cranbrook

On the death in 1943 of Sunder Singh, a Cranbrook shopkeeper and Businessman, the Chairman of the Cranbrook Road Board placed on record that the Board “regrets the loss of a citizen and ratepayer and one held in such high esteem by all in the district, in the person of Sunder Singh.”

Albany Advertiser, Thursday 30 December 1943, page 5

For more information on Sikh hawkers and shopkeepers in Western Australia type the following into your search engine:

Western Australian Sikh Hawkers Australian Sikh Heritage.

Discuss the usefulness of the memories and images included here. What can be learnt about the positive and negative experiences of the Sikh traders in these communities?

3.3 Sikh cameleers played an important role in Western Australia during the early twentieth century. One of the earliest recorded cameleers was Pal Singh who in the 1880s was a carting contractor and teamster in Wyndham. Cameleers were employed across the state - in Coolgardie, Norseman, Wiluna, Kellerberrin to cart farm produce, construction materials, water and supplies to regions inaccessible to horses. Camel strings and wagons were in demand until the 1930s when trucks were used to ply the routes carved out by the cameleers. Junda Singh bought a wagon and team of 18 camels from Dost Mohammed, a well established cameleer in the Meekatharra region. Singh earned his living by carting goods to stations out of Wiluna and taking their wool back to the rail head at Meekatharra. However, his business ended when in 1932 a rail line from Meekatharra to Wiluna began operating. Junda Singh's camels were set free and his wagon was abandoned, unused for over 60 years until the Shire of Wiluna paid for its restoration. The 6.1metre wagon is now on display in that town.



The restored camel wagon, built in 1905, once owned by Dost Mohammed and Junda Singh
Courtesy of Australian Sikh Heritage Association.

3.4 During the 1920s the small Sikh community were able to change Western Australian law. They believed that the body of a recently deceased person must be cremated and petitioned the state government to ensure this was legally accepted. Massa Singh and Buttan Singh applied for the land near the Canning River which had been used for a Sikh cremation. The Cremations Act of 1929 resulted and a special cemetery in Riverton, a suburb of Perth, was allocated to the Sikh community in 1932.

For further information use your search engine to find: “Australia Sikh Heritage WA Sikh cremations” and “Canning Times Heritage park to tell story of Sikh contribution to Australia”

From the evidence provided in this Learning sequence it becomes clear that during the first half of the twentieth century, within the so called “white” Australia, there were thriving communities of people of Asian heritage. Some married Aboriginal or European women, and most lived productive lives within communities and influenced the cultural, economic and political environment, creating change based on their own beliefs and customs.

Activity 4: Extension exercise. Teacher resource 5: Net Migration Data

The changing migration patterns during the years from 1901 to the start of World War Two in 1939 reflect changes to the Australian economy and politics over these years. In times of boom migration will usually increase as immigrants are pulled to a new country with prospects to improve their lives. While during an economic downturn people may emigrate to seek work in another country. The aftermath of war also causes disruption and may push people to leave their homeland to begin a fresh life overseas. These are referred to as the push-pull factors in migration. [Teacher Resource 5](#) provides information on Australian Net Overseas Migration from 1901 -1939. Net overseas Migration (NOM) data has been used since 1925 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. It provides the net or overall increase or decrease of population through immigration into Australia and emigration out of Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics calculates NOM every three months.

See [Teacher Resource 5: Net Migration Data Analysis 1901 -1939](#)

For a review of terminology used in this Learning sequence see [Teacher Resource 6: Vocabulary](#)