

# Sikh and Indian Australians

## TEACHER RESOURCE 1 - ETHNIC GROUPS IN COLONIAL AUSTRALIA

Australia, although tenaciously British in heritage, was located within the Asia-Pacific region. Trade and migration from Asian countries such as India, China, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies (present day Indonesia) was common in the region, and so, from the earliest days of the Swan River colony non-European people lived and worked in the colony. Towns such as Broome were outposts of Asia, with the non-European population outnumbering the “white” inhabitants.

Activity: Allocate or have children choose one of the national groups (1 to 5). The students should use the information of the non-European group provided here (1 to 5). They could create an Info graphic (or a hand drawn poster) which includes: Name of group, the numbers and the role of the groups in Australia during the colonial era. European attitudes towards these minority groups.

### 1. Chinese

The earliest Chinese came to the colonies as servants of migrants, free settlers or indentured workers known as coolies. One free Chinese settler arrived just four months after the start of the Swan River colony. His name was Moon Chow, he settled in Fremantle, married an English woman and became a carpenter.

- The ongoing demand for cheap labour in the Swan River colony prompted the government to help fund the transport of Chinese indentured labourers from Singapore. A total of 51 Chinese labourers were brought to the colony during 1847 and 1848.
- The use of low paid Chinese labour was still used to an extent during the convict era in the colony, from 1850 to 1868.
- Between 1847 and 1897, approximately 1,000 Chinese immigrants entered Western Australia as indentured servants according to historian Anne Atkinson.
- By the 1870s there was demand by pastoralists and pearling companies for cheap labour. In 1874 government of WA put aside £1000 to finance Chinese or Javanese coolies.
- A new law was passed by the WA Government in 1874, the “Labour Registry Act”, directed Chinese men only to work as contracted labourers in jobs such as farm hands, carpenters, boat crew, cooks and gardeners. This Act forbid Chinese women and children to enter the colony.
- Chinese men were seen by employers and the colonial government as a temporary workforce contracted for two to three years to meet the demands for cheap, plentiful and obedient workers in the pastoral, agricultural and pearling industries, often in isolated areas.
- Anti-Chinese union activity aimed to limit markets for Chinese products. These restrictions resulted in Chinese concentration in industries which least threatened European businessmen.
- From 1886, legislation restricted the number of Chinese entering Western Australia.
- In 1901, according to the WA Census, 575 Chinese males throughout Western Australia were mainly involved in market gardening. Most Chinese market gardens were established in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

Resources for student research

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-08/perth-chung-wah-chinese-association-celebrates-lunar-new-year/7149708>

<http://explore.moadoph.gov.au/timelines/milestones-in-australian-democracy>

## **2. Indian Indentured labourers and lascars**

- The first wave of Indian migrants to Australia occurred between 1800 and 1860, initially to work as indentured labourers and household servants for British immigrants. Many lived in the eastern colonies. As part of trans-national history, wealthy British people who worked in India took their Indian servants with them when they settled in Australia and other colonies.
- Many East India Company ships brought supplies from India to the colonies so lascars (Indian sailors) could jump ship or gain work in the colonies. There was some evidence of intermarriage between lascars and Aboriginal women. Unfortunately there are very few records of lascars who lived in Australia.
- In 1838 Charles Prinsep, who lived in the Indian city of Calcutta, sent the following people to establish his farm the Belvedere Estate, near Bunbury in the Swan River Colony: A British caretaker as well as “13 British men, one Chinaman and 37 Lascars”.
- Charles Prinsep ‘favoured his Indians as domestic and agricultural labourers’ because they were so ‘docile’(obedient), and provided a cheap and flexible labour force to grow crops of vegetables and fruit to supply the estate’s needs and sell at local markets”.
- The Western Australian Government put money aside to hire Indian workers during the 1840s when there was a great shortage of labour in the colony. (which led to the introduction of British convicts in 1850)
- Many people believed indentured labourers, whose work was strictly controlled, and usually of three years duration, were like slaves and therefore caused much debate.
- Indians workers came to Australia from Singapore, Fiji as well as South Asia.

<http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p290761/html/Text/cho1.xhtml?referer=236&page=6#footnote-13551-38>

## **3. Indian travellers (Hawkers)**

- Over the years from 1860 to 1901 another wave of Indians came to Australia, they were mainly Sikhs and Muslims from the Punjab region in North West India.
- They were not indentured but self funded. During the 1870s railway transport was available from the Punjab to ports such as Bombay and Karachi in India which made travel easier.
- Many worked hard in Australia as agricultural labourers, caring for horses or as hawkers to bring much needed goods to in country people. Some also went to the gold fields to work as carters.
- The hawkers bought goods from warehouses in the capital cities or from other Indians in country towns.
- They travelled widely and were generally welcomed on farms providing news, letters and a wide range of farm and personal goods in their mobile shops.
- The hawkers who were successful invested in land, general stores and sent money to their family in India. As Sikhs believe it is important to assist other people through charitable work they often contributed to local communities by helping on farms, donating to hospitals and charities

<https://museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/discoverycentre/your-questions/indian-hawkers/>

<http://www.australiansikhheritage.com/sikhhawkersandpeddlers/>

## 4. Cameleers



Loading wool bales on a camel

<http://collections.museumvictoria.com.au/articles/1490>

- The majority of the cameleers were Muslims, but some followed Hindu and Sikh beliefs.
- Often just called “Afghans” in Australia, they provided important and efficient communication and supply links across Australia from the 1870s until the late 1930s.
- Between 1870 and 1900 over 2000 cameleers and around 15,000 camels entered Australia. Most cameleers came for three year contracts; leaving their families at home and returning to their homeland to renew their contracts.
- Cameleers assisted explorers to cover expanses of inland Australia. One of the earliest recorded use of camels was during the Burke and Wills expedition in 1860.
- The camel teams carted materials for the Overland Telegraph line constructed between 1870 and 1872, Kalgoorlie pipeline and later the Trans-Australian railway.
- They transported tools, machinery, letters and other essential supplies to isolated pastoral stations and returned with bales of wool or other products to export.
- They took water and firewood to mining communities in the Western Australian gold fields and carried sleepers for the Perth to Coolgardie railway line.
- On the Western Australian Goldfields in 1896, as an “Asiatic Alien”, they were forbidden to mine for gold.
- It is believed that cameleers saved towns in Wilcannia and Tibooburra during the “Federation Drought” in Eastern Australia from 1900 to 1902.
- Most cameleers lived in “Ghan towns” (also called camel camps) on the edge of towns like Coolgardie where they constructed small mosques. Some married Aboriginal or local women.
- Conflict between cameleers and Europeans occurred on the WA goldfields over the use of water holes, competition with European bullock teams and poor communication. In 1894 an Anti-Afghan League was established in the WA gold fields.
- Albert Calvert (who travelled in Western Australia during the 1890s) wrote about the attitudes of miners in Coolgardie toward Afghan camel drivers in 1895:  
 “The white man, strong in the superiority of race, of the glory of the British Empire, regards the Afghan camel driver as an... alien, who is as much inferior to him in brains as in muscle, a trespasser against him in the labour market, and worse than all, a trespasser who is willing to work for a low rate of wages...”

## 5. Malays and Japanese employed in the Western Australian pearling industry

### The population of Broome in 1901

NATIONALITY	POPULATION
European	132
Malayan	699
Filipino	307
Japanese	280
Others(such as Macassan from Indonesia)	72
Total	1490

- In 1875 there were 989 Malays and 493 Aboriginal people employed on the 57 vessels licensed out of the port of Cossack on Roebourne Bay. Estimates including other ports suggest a total of 1800 Malays were employed in Western Australia.  
Julia Martinez “The Evolution of Malay Labour Activism, 1870 -1947”. *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, Vol. 4 No 2 November 2009  
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC>
- The term Malay was used to describe divers from a range of Asian nations employed in the industry.
- A very profitable industry, pearl shell was used for jewellery, buttons, buckles, hair combs and household items. Japanese and Malayan men came to northern Australia as indentured labourers to work in the pearling industry and many stayed on as divers.
- By 1900 the Japanese divers dominated the pearl shell industry in Broome, valued by the pearling companies because of their skill and bravery. When dressed ready to enter the water the pearl diver’s gear weighed nearly 200 kilograms! Pearl diving was a very dangerous business, they faced cyclones, paralysis (the bends), sharks, water snakes and problems with their air hoses (tender lines).
- The ranking of nationalities living in Broome went from Aboriginal Australians(who were treated very badly and often did not receive pay), Asians indentured labourers, mixed race people, to Asian merchants, divers and their tenders (support on the luggers) and Europeans who could own pearl luggers and made great profits from the industry.



Some of the graves of Japanese divers in the Broome Cemetery. *M. Southee*

<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/australias-pearling-industry>

<http://kimberleycoast.com.au/about-the-kimberley-coast/pearling/>

<http://visitwa.com.au/australias-north-west-region.html>