

Part 3: Across the Centuries –

Pacific Histories around the region

Unit 21: Fiji: Is it sweet anymore? The Development of the Fiji Sugar Industry

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Glossary

Indenture system	A system of employment where a worker is bound to his or her employer for a period of time by a contract (usually favouring the employer)
Inhumane	Treatment of workers that was cruel, unjust and insulting
Mechanisation	Use of machines to harvest and produce sugar
Nationalised	When a new nation takes over a major industry and become the owner and operator of the business
Sugar mill	A building containing machinery for manufacturing sugar

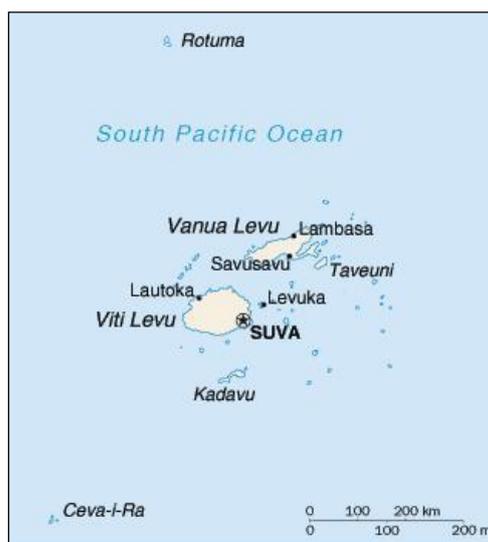


Figure 21.1. Map of Fiji

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- Understand the emergence and development of the sugar industry in Fiji since the late 1870s
- Understand the role of indentures labour from India
- Be familiar with the current situation of the Fijian sugar industry

How important is the sugar industry for the Fijian economy?

Once upon a time “things were sweet” in Fiji. It had a thriving sugar industry which was a vital part of the islands’ economy. However, things have changed considerably since the late 1800s, when sugar crops began to be grown commercially. At present, the sugar cane farmers are facing financial hardship, and the industry faces an uncertain future in the global market.

In this chapter, you will have the opportunity to take a journey back in time and examine the different attempts made by different parties to secure a stable position for the sugar industry in Fiji. You will also briefly look at the current situation of the industry.

How did the sugar industry start in Fiji? Sugar plantations: early attempts

Sugar cane was grown in Fiji before European contact. In 1862, the first sugar was produced in Fiji by David Whippy at the Wakaya Mill. It was not until the 1870s that sugar crops were grown commercially, to be turned into crystalline sugar for sale both locally and internationally.

The first mills were established in the wetter parts of Fiji, because it was believed that these areas would produce good sugar cane. But this belief was later proved wrong. The advantage of these areas was that they were close to the main trading centres of Fiji, Levuka and Suva.

From the 1860s to the early 1900s, there were many attempts by different people to develop plantation crops in Fiji, as an alternative to its declining cotton industry. In 1871, Governor Raku Cakobau offered a prize of 500 pounds for the best production of 20 tonnes of sugar before 1873.

Between the 1860s and early 1900s, a number of sugar mills were established in Fiji. For example, in 1862, the Wakaya Mill was established and became known for the first production of crystalline sugar. In 1873, a small experimental **sugar mill** was set up in Suva by Brewer and Joske, becoming the first exporter of sugar. In the same year, the Rewa Mill produced the first shipment to London.

Several mills were set up in Taveuni after 1874. The most successful was the one established by Bylliard, which produced ten tonnes of sugar per day.

In 1881, the Penang Mill was opened for business by the Chalmers brothers in Rakiraki. It became the first successful mill in a dry area. This mill produced five tones of sugar per day.

In 1884, the Navua Mill was established, changing hands several times. Its most successful owner was Fiji Sugar Company. In 1884-5 the Savusavu & Dreketi Mill was set up; in 1886, the Rarawai Mill, and in 1894 the Labasa Mill. The most successful and largest mil in Fiji was the Lautoka Mill, which even created its own settlement (*See Figure 21.2 for an image of a contemporary saw mill*).

Questions and Activities

1. Why were sugar cane plantations introduced to Fiji?
2. Why were Levuka and Suva chosen for the establishment between the 1860s and early 1900s?

The indenture system

From 1879, indentured labourers from India played a central role in the Fijian sugar industry. But how did the Indian workers end up in Fiji? In 1875, the Governor of Fiji, Sir Arthur Gordon, was faced with the problem of how to develop Fiji's economy. The grant of 100,000 pounds which had been given by the Imperial Government to develop the islands' economy had not been sufficient, so alternatives such as copper mining and cotton and sugar plantations had to be considered.

The plantations alternative was attractive, but would require a good source of labour. As Sir Arthur did not want to interfere with the traditional Fijian ways of life, he decided that labour would be recruited from India. This practice had worked in places such as Trinidad, Mauritius and British Guiana and indeed, was to change the future of Fiji.

Arrangements were made in 1878 with the Indian Government for labourers to be brought over to Fiji for a period of five years. After that they would be able to return to their homeland at their own expense. If they wished to remain in Fiji for another five years, their return fares, as well as their families' would be paid by the Fijian government.

But if the workers wished to remain in Fiji, they had permission to do so. The Indian labourers came to Fiji for reasons such as poverty, the hope of making a 'good life', to escape from family feuds or authorities, or just a desire to experience a different culture. The workers were engaged by agents in India who ensured that they were properly enrolled before a magistrate and had a thorough medical examination. For every labourer who reached Fiji, the agents received a commission.

On 14 May 1879, 498 labourers arrived in Fiji. The Indian Government insisted that for every hundred men, there should be forty women. But life was not easy in Fiji for these new migrants. They were housed in barracks or 'lines', containing 16 rooms in double rows that could house either 3 single men or a couple with three children. All cooking, eating and sleeping were carried out in the room.

The sugar industry in Fiji: Some Facts and Figures

- Cane is grown on the western parts of the two main islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.
- Farms are usually located on the coastal plains and on the second and third class land, immediately inland.
- For every 100 tonnes of cane produced, about 12.5 tonnes of sugar and 3.3 tonnes of molasses are produced. Molasses is either used locally or exported.
- Raw sugar is stored in bulk for shipment overseas, except at Penang where it is bagged for Fiji and other Pacific Islands. Sugar is stored at Malau and Lautoka.
- **Mechanisation** enables a 18,000 tonne capacity ship to load in less than 24 hours, whereas in the past the process took up to three weeks.

The Indian labourers faced problems such as overcrowding, poor living conditions, lack of privacy and fights. There was no provision for medical care, which led to disease and high death rates. The rate of suicide among the labourers was high.



Figure 21.2 Harvesting sugar cane; Note the nearby the railway for cane trains



Figure 21.2 Lautoka Sugar mill

Work done in the fields varied according to the time of year. The labourers cut cane during harvesting, and at other times they planted, weeded or cleared drains (*see Figure 21.1 for contemporary cane cutting methods*). Work was done on a 'task system', that is, the labourers were required to complete a certain amount of work before nightfall. If they did not finish their work, they were not paid their wages for the day and could be prosecuted.

Foremen, or *sardars*, were paid to check if the work was done quickly and cheaply. They tended to overwork the labourers. In 1905, after close checks on the system, the amount of over-tasking was reduced. Punishment by beating was common. The Indians worked in a state of stress and fear.

In 1912, the missionary J.S. Burton outlined the abuses of the indenture system in a book and called for better treatment of the workers. Burton's plea was taken up by C.K. Gokhale, a member of the Legislative Council in India, who then asked the Indian government to abolish the indenture system.

In 1915, C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson were sent to Fiji to investigate the working conditions of the Indian labourers. They produced a report which painted a sad picture of the **inhumane** nature of the indenture system; the Government could no longer ignore the problem. Recruiting stopped in 1916, and the remaining contracts of indentured labourers were cancelled on 2 January 1920.

Questions and Activities

1. What was the main problem facing Governor Gordon in 1875?
2. What was the main problem with plantations, and how was it solved?
3. What were the main reasons Indian labourers came to Fiji?
4. What were the main problems faced by Indian labourers?
5. Why is sugar cane grown on the western parts of Fiji's main islands?
6. Give an example of the advantages of mechanisation in sugar mills

Colonial Sugar Refining Company Limited (CSR)

The CSR is a well-established Australian company which, following an invitation by the Fijian government, started operating in Fiji in 1880. The Company purchased about one thousand acres of land alongside the Rewa River.

CSR brought resources and experience to Fiji. Its first mill was set up in Nausori in 1882, followed by the Rarawai Mill in 1886, Labasa Mill in 1894, and Lautoka Mill in 1903. In 1926, the CSR bought the Penang Mill at Rakiraki from the *Melbourne Trust Co.*

When the indenture system ended, the CSR had almost full control of the sugar industry in Fiji. Most labourers came under the control of this company.

However, industrial problems such as strikes were frequent at the CSR, usually over setting the price and amount of cane to be provided to the mills. Because of these problems, there were strikes in 1957 and 1960.

In 1961, the CSR formed a Fijian subsidiary, the *South Pacific Sugar Mills Ltd (SPSM)*. Although shares were offered to the public, only a small number of shares were purchased. The CSR withdrew from Fiji in 1973, following an award by Lord Denning on the sharing of proceeds, which was not acceptable to the management. Fiji was by this time an independent nation. The sugar industry was **nationalised**.

Questions and Activities

7. Put the following events in chronological order:

- CSR withdraws from Fiji
- First indentured labourers arrived in Fiji from India
- CSR starts operating in Fiji
- Sugar crops begin to be grown commercially in Fiji
- Indenture system ends

8. How extensive were the activities of the CSR in Fiji?

9. What was the contribution of the CSR to Fiji?

Current situation; current problems

Sugar is still the biggest industry in Fiji, and can be seen as the backbone of the islands' economy. It accounts for almost two-thirds of Fiji's exports. For every 100 tonnes of cane produced, about 12.5 tonnes of sugar and 3.3 tonnes of molasses are produced.

Many Fijians depend on the sugar industry for their livelihood. They live in the sugar districts, in towns that have developed around Fiji's four sugar mills. The sugar industry currently employs about 22,000 farmers, 2,000 seasonal cane cutters and 2,200 mill workers.

However, at present the industry faces a number of challenges, both locally and internationally. For example, there was a severe drought in 1998, which very negatively affected farmers. The farmers then asked the Government for cash grants to compensate for their losses. As this was denied, they refused to harvest and the mills were closed. A number of coups led to the government changing hands, and this uncertainty also affected the sugar price. These political problems also meant Fiji lost the subsidy under which its sugar was sold cheaply in Europe.

Given the present situation, not all is 'sweet' in Fiji. There is a lot of uncertainty about the future of its sugar industry. On the local front, the pressing issues are land leases, industrial disputes, improving the technology and equipment, the world prices for sugar, drought and other natural disasters.

In the international arena, if the Fijian sugar industry is to remain viable and competitive in the global market, a lot of improvement is needed by groups such as farmers, millers, landowners and the government.

History of Sugar in Fiji: A Timeline

1862 First sugar produced in Fiji, on Wakaya, by David Whippy

1870	Fiji turns away from cotton to sugar
1870-1880s	Many schemes for the establishment of sugar mills attempted by planters and businessmen to replace cotton
1871	Concerned about the declining economy, Raku Cakobau offers an incentive of 500 pounds sterling for the 'first and best' crop of 20 tonnes of sugar produced
	Brewer and Joske erect a small experimental sugar mill in Suva
1872	The British Government brings indentured labourers from India
1879	The <i>CSR</i> starts operating in Fiji
1880	Penmang Mill founded by the Chalmers brothers, established in Rakiraki
1881	<i>CSR's</i> first mill starts operating in Nausori
1882	Sugar becomes the main export in Fiji
1883	Rarawai mill established in Ba
1886	Labasa mill established
1894	End of the indenture system
1916	Indian workers make certain demands not considered by the Governor

1920-21	CSR buys the Penang mill at Rakiraki
	CSR forms a Fijian subsidiary, the <i>South Pacific Sugar Mills Ltd</i>
1926	CSR withdraws from Fiji
1961	Government buys CSR's interest in the company for \$10 million
1973	Government forms the <i>Fiji Sugar Marketing Company Ltd</i> to handle marketing activities
1976	Severe drought affected farmers
1998	

Questions and Activities

10. Why is the sugar industry important to the livelihood of Fijians?
11. Why were the sugar cane farmers dissatisfied with the Fijian Government, and what did they do to express this dissatisfaction?
12. "Is it sweet anymore?" Using your own words, write about the current situation of the sugar industry in Fiji and its prospects for the future
13. Consult the timeline. In your opinion, what are the main events associated with the sugar industry in Fiji? Explain why you think they are important.