

# India and New Zealand: **The ties that bind us.**



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**About the author**

A graduate of Canterbury University, Graeme Waters is a former New Zealand diplomat who has twice served on postings in India – once as Deputy High Commissioner to Sir Edmund Hillary in the late 1980's and as High Commissioner from 2004 to 2007. Earlier he had also served as Ambassador to the Philippines and on postings in Papua New Guinea, the Cook Islands and South Korea.

More recently Graeme acted briefly as a trade consultant for Fonterra during the botulism crisis and has been an international adviser to Auckland Zoo.

Graeme first visited India in 1980, when he was responsible for aspects of New Zealand's development assistance programme in South Asia. His wife Audrey is of Indian descent, and they were engaged to be married in Fiji, Audrey's country of birth. Their daughter Melissa met her husband Matthieu while staying in India, and their son Andrew proposed to his wife Loren – herself of Pakistani and English descent – on a houseboat in Kerala.

India is now thus firmly in the family blood. Next year he and Audrey plan to retrace Audrey's ancestral family footsteps from Kerala to Fiji.



## No history of two countries is ever guilt free – India and New Zealand included.

There are accounts of Indian crew members on ships that visited New Zealand in the eighteenth century. The first to settle jumped ship in 1809 or 1810 and married a Maori woman. More detail is available on two Indians, Bir Singh and his brother Phuman, who arrived around 1890. Jacqueline Leckie<sup>1</sup> has chronicled how they married Māori and English women respectively. That would qualify them as model multicultural citizens in today's Auckland, but in the decades that followed their arrival the environment was less welcoming. New Zealand did not encourage Asian migrants, although the Chinese suffered more specific discrimination than Indians. Enough said.

There are some shared colonial memories. One colonial footnote is that a British regiment in India was diverted from its planned trip home to provide reinforcements in New Zealand's land wars in the 1860s. The Khandallah suburb in Wellington owes its name to the nostalgia of Captain Edward Battersbee, a former veterinary surgeon in the Bombay Light Cavalry. He built "Khandallah" house in 1857. The railway station and thus the suburb were later named after it. Hence such names as Simla Crescent, Baroda Street and Lucknow Terrace. In a fitting update, the names of cricket luminaries such as Kapil Dev and Sunil Gavaskar have been added to the list, while Lohia Street is recognition in Hindi of a property developer named Steel. Auckland's own Bombay Hills, incidentally, merely commemorate a ship named Bombay which plied the route from England.

In a further variation on the colonial theme, New Zealand soldiers were despatched to Fiji in 1920 to reinforce the police in controlling striking labourers and farmers. In the words of *Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, Edward Puttick led a small expeditionary force to help the colonial government, which was faced with a strike by the Indian public works and municipal workers. In the decades prior, indentured Indians had provided much of the labour in Fiji. The system of indenture was suspended in 1916 then formally abolished in 1920. Good riddance to the system, but the Indian people mostly stayed on and largely prospered from their enterprise and hard work – albeit not without communal tensions in the decades that followed.

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1 Jacqueline Leckie, "A Long Diaspora: Indian Settlement" in *India in New Zealand: Local Identities, Global Relations*, p45, Otago University Press, 2010.



## Defence legacies

The military plot really thickens at Gallipoli. New Zealanders know the legend of Chunuk Bair. They know the gallant Wellington group led by Colonel William Malone held on to their high point in a heroic and ultimately tragic assault. But an Indian history could claim that the nearest thing to a breakthrough was when Gurkha troops held a higher point to the left, albeit for a shorter time. So honours shared perhaps? After that tough and dreadful campaign, the New Zealanders were to experience even higher casualties on the Somme and then at Passchendaele, while the Indians (who also served in greater numbers at Flanders and on the Somme) suffered what they regarded as an even more whimsical and ill planned campaign in Mesopotamia.

Did the New Zealand and Indian soldiers interact much with each other at Gallipoli? Major H.M. Alexander of the Indian Mule Transport wrote of the camaraderie between the ANZAC and Indian soldiers and that they were frequently seen talking and eating chapatis together<sup>2</sup>. One Kiwi soldier's diary records his attempts to cadge chapatis from his Indian counterparts. Corroboration that the New Zealand rations were dreadful, and perhaps a portent of greater collaboration in the food sector to come. No mention of cricket, though the first commemoration of ANZAC Day was allegedly a 1916 cricket game in Egypt between the Australians and the New Zealanders.

In the Second World War Indian and New Zealand forces participated in the North Africa and Italian campaigns, and can count El Alamein and Monte Cassino amongst battles fought together. New Zealand's 2nd Division formed a New Zealand

Corps with 4th Indian Division for the 1944 assault on Cassino. After the bombing of the Monastery in February, the Maori Battalion attacked along the railway line into Cassino while the Indian Division attempted to take the Monastery Hill from the hills opposite. It proved to be part of the second of four battles for Cassino. When the Indian and New Zealand Divisions were replaced six weeks later they had respectively lost 3,000 and 1,600 men killed, missing and wounded.

The two countries also share another piece of military history – the naval cruiser *INS Delhi*. She started life in 1933 as *HMS Achilles* and crewed by New Zealanders engaged in 1939 with *Ajax* and *Exeter* against the pocket battleship *Graf Spee*. She later became HMNZS *Achilles* and starred as herself in the 1956 film of the 'Battle of the River Plate', predating any Bollywood collaborations. Parts of her deck and scuttle still grace the interior of the Royal Bombay Yacht Club - no change of name to Mumbai for them. One of her gun turrets is to be found at Auckland's Museum of Transport and Technology.

A generation of Indian Navy leaders served on *INS Delhi* and recalled her with affection. She was scrapped in 1978 after 30 years of service with the Indian Navy, the last 20 in a training role – but don't mention Goa. She was reportedly mistaken for a cargo vessel when she appeared off the coast there in 1961, and the rest, as they say, is history. She visited New Zealand again in 1969, prompting many a reunion of *Achilles* veterans.

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<sup>2</sup>H.M.Alexander is quoted in an article by Rakesh Krishnan Simha, "Why Indians need their Anzac moment", 28 April 2014, *Auckland City Harbour News*, [Stuff.co.nz](http://Stuff.co.nz)



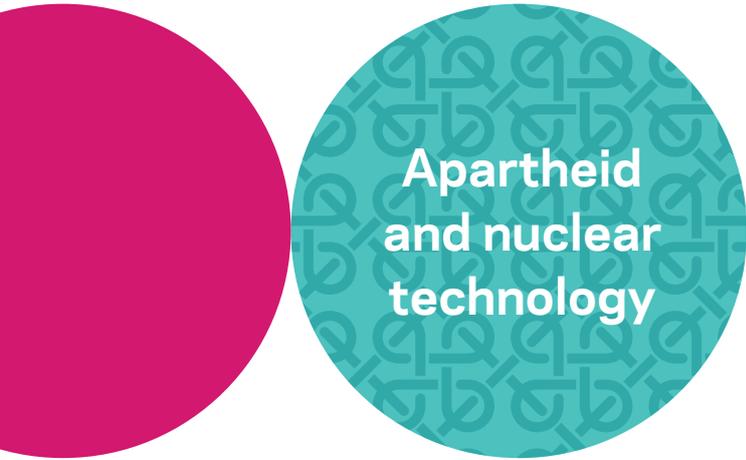
## Commonwealth connections and household names

When the *Achilles* was delivered to the Indian Navy, India was a member of the Commonwealth but not yet a republic. So the *Achilles* first became HMIS *Delhi*. New Zealand was initially at odds with India's ambition to become a republic within the Commonwealth, regarding this as having your cake and eating it too. New Zealand Prime Minister Peter Fraser also tussled with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru over whether the Commonwealth should become a collective security organisation. Nehru's contrary view prevailed, but with no loss of respect between the two. They came from vastly different backgrounds, not least because Fraser had once worked as a carpenter in the Palace of Westminster while Nehru had studied at Harrow.

If Mahatma Gandhi and an independent India captured the world's imagination, New Zealand managed to capture India's imagination too. Edmund Hillary's ascent of Everest in 1953 made him a household name in India. Another person destined to become a household name was Dr Verghese Kurien, who enjoyed an attachment in the 1950s at New Zealand's Massey University to study the dairy industry. He notably went on to found Operation Flood, India's transformational dairy cooperative programme, but retained fond memories of the hospitality afforded him by his New Zealand hosts.

The Colombo Plan and subsequent bilateral aid programmes provided a framework for some specific New Zealand-assisted development activities in the dairy sector, but it is thanks to Dr Kurien that India is firmly established as the world's largest dairy producer. Is there more we should do to collaborate in dairy? Arguably yes.

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## Apartheid and nuclear technology

While cricket serves as a binding glue in the relationship (New Zealand played its first test in India in 1955), two issues have occasionally put India and New Zealand at odds in the past six decades: apartheid and nuclear technology. Both have engendered deep feelings in each country. Mahatma Gandhi's struggle for Indian freedom reputedly had its origins in a segregated railway carriage in South Africa. The campaign against apartheid became a unifying factor in India's relations with much of the Non-Aligned Movement. Embracing that cause in the 1980s did no harm to the prospects of aspiring young politicians in India's Congress party.

By contrast, in New Zealand the issue was firmly entangled with New Zealanders' love of sport – and in particular rugby. The New Zealand Rugby Union leadership in the 1970s had first-hand memories of defeat at the hands of the visiting 1937 Springboks, reinforced by further defeat in South Africa in 1949. The sporting respect and rivalry persist to this day, but in a happier post-apartheid context. In the '70s and '80s, it was a divisive electoral issue for New Zealand, highlighted by the protests and civil disruption associated with the rugby tour by South Africa in 1981. The controversy in New Zealand was replicated on a bigger Commonwealth stage, centring on the Gleneagles Agreement and whether New Zealand had complied adequately with it. The differences between Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and New Zealand Prime Minister Robert Muldoon seemed to provide the context for New Zealand's shock decision in 1982 to close its High Commission in Delhi.

It was a low point in the relationship and a contrast to the goodwill engendered by Norman Kirk's visit early in his tenure as Prime Minister to both India and Bangladesh. The damage was compounded by New Zealand attempts to sell the land allocated to it at a peppercorn rental for its diplomatic compound. Fortunately for New Zealand the attempt to sell it was frustrated, and the incoming 1984 Labour Government had already made it clear it would build on the chancery site – famously guarded in the interim by the sole remaining local staff, Babu Gomes. Prime Minister David Lange, a lifelong lover of India, cleverly appointed Sir Edmund Hillary, who shared that love, as High Commissioner. In a further inspired move, Sir Miles Warren was commissioned by Fletcher Construction to come up with a design for the new diplomatic chancery and residences. It drew on the classic Lutyens design for the Presidential Palace and secretariat buildings in Delhi, thus paying perfect tribute to the host city. Formally opened by then Minister of Foreign Affairs Don McKinnon in 1992, it fronts the now-renamed Sir Edmund Hillary Marg and Tenzing Norgay Marg in Delhi's Chanakyapuri.

David Lange's passion for India and things Indian nicely matched his friendship with India's new Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. They were both relatively new to the job and young to go with it. Rajiv Gandhi's visit to New Zealand in 1986 was a crowd puller and a great media success, complete with a surprise appearance on 'This is Your Life' in honour of Sir Edmund Hillary. One promise quietly forgotten though, was that of a replacement elephant for Wellington Zoo. There were worries about foot and mouth disease risk on the New Zealand side, and Wellington Zoo (unlike Auckland) was only ever big enough for one elephant – a poor deal for such a social animal. So it never happened and in this century Wellington would never ask, and India would never offer – it now has a ban on the export of elephants.

On the surface, the Lange years were a relatively harmonious time for relations on nuclear matters, with New Zealand's newly independent stance attracting plenty of commendation in India. But it is a subject on which India and New Zealand have often been at odds.

India's 1974 "peaceful nuclear explosion" attracted heavy media criticism in New Zealand, and gentler but still disapproving comment from the Labour Government of the day. Ostensibly there was a sweet spot in the relationship during the Lange years, but this may have been due less to a consensus on proliferation issues than to Indian admiration for the independence shown by New Zealand. In keeping with that, there was ready Indian support for New Zealand's new association with the Non-Aligned Movement.

In foreign policy talks in Delhi in 1988, India shared in advance with New Zealand the proposal for global nuclear disarmament which Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi would present to the United Nations General Assembly that year. There was a hook implicit in the proposal, however - if the nuclear powers did not commit to disarmament, India, which had always regarded the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as an unequal arrangement, would not renounce its own nuclear ambitions. According to Indian academic, journalist and foreign policy analyst C Raja Mohan, the rejection of India's initiative provided the moral cover that Rajiv Gandhi needed for India to proceed further along the nuclear weapons path. It was a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Government that took the major step of a second nuclear test in 1998, prompting Pakistan in turn to carry out its own nuclear test and incur heavy international sanctions as a result.

Nuclear differences provided an unscheduled backdrop to Prime Minister Helen Clark's visit to India in 2004. She was reported by a Hindustan Times journalist, in advance of the visit, as having described Kashmir as a "nuclear flashpoint". She hadn't, and could prove it, and she and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh did not allow the resulting media fallout to derail their own bilateral relationship-building. Any hopes that the New Zealand media might highlight the evident IT and other economic opportunities in India were largely lost, however, when a junior PR official at Larsen & Toubro told the New Zealand media team that the company was involved in manufacturing nuclear weapons. As a more senior executive soon clarified, she had meant to say nuclear power plants. The New Zealand media, with potential nuclear policy inconsistency in their sights, "missed a chance to promote a better understanding of India and Indians" as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Head of the School of History, Philosophy, Political

Science and International Relations at the Victoria University of Wellington, later put it<sup>3</sup>. When John Key became the next Prime Minister to visit, in 2011, the media focus was more squarely on the economic opportunities, against the backdrop of the new NZ Inc India strategy and free trade agreement talks.

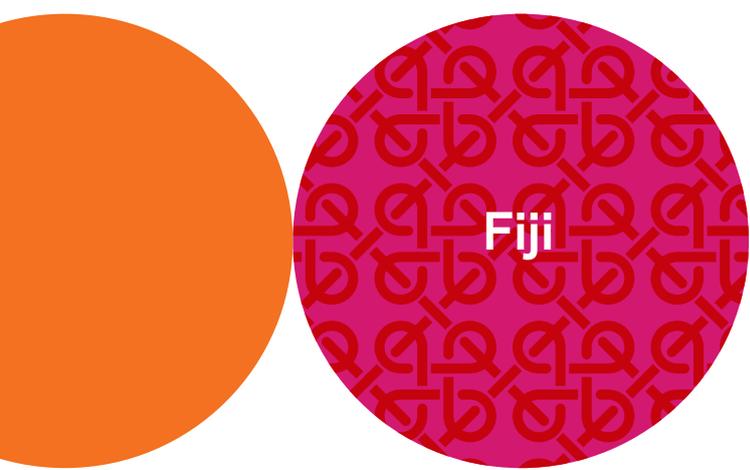
Meanwhile, the difference in approaches was further highlighted by the unveiling in 2006 of the India-United States nuclear energy deal, which provided for US support for India's nuclear energy industry under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards in return for ring-fencing of India's nuclear weapons programme. Across the world it proved a polariser, sometimes within the same organisation. One European ambassador in Delhi found himself at odds with his own son back in the multilateral division in the capital. An international news magazine reputedly took its cue without consulting its man in the field. Was the deal a creative way of regularising India's status and bringing India into closer alignment with the West, while addressing serious energy needs, or was it a serious undermining of the NPT regime?

New Zealand leaders were concerned about the implications for the NPT but did not in the finish block a waiver for India in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in 2008. The proposal took longer to come to fruition because of opposition within India itself, where partisan dissension over the deal led one commentator to ask if India was "a country that can't take yes for an answer". Now that yes is the answer, India next seeks support for its application to join the NSG. While indicating that it does not oppose Indian membership, New Zealand has advocated that there first be clear criteria established for non-NPT members to join the NSG.

Indian media have made clear that membership is a high priority for India, and will be seen by it as a measure of the relationship. The differences still have a potential to jar in a way that differences over say climate change have not. The Joint Statement from Prime Minister John Key's visit in 2011, incidentally, affirmed that "Both sides share the vision of a nuclear weapon free world. New Zealand welcomes increased engagement between India and the multilateral export control regimes."

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<sup>3</sup>In *The Shadow of the Empire: India-New Zealand Relations Since 1947* included in *India in New Zealand, Local Identities, Global Relations* edited Sekhara Bandyopadhyaya, Otago University, 2010



## Fiji

Fiji is a shared interest for New Zealand and India, but again their views have not always been in perfect alignment. Indian anxiety levels were arguably at their highest after the Rabuka coups of 1987 when New Zealand and Australia also needed to show awareness of indigenous people's concerns. After the Bainimarama coup of 2006, the anxiety levels were higher in New Zealand.

Indian concerns about yet another coup seemed softened somewhat by the Fiji Indian community's own comfort with Bainimarama's policy positions – he was a supporter of law and order and multi-racialism, and against the aggressive land policies pursued by the Qarase administration he deposed. Interestingly, one Indian academic has suggested that India's ongoing ties with the Bainimarama regime, before it held elections, helped to contain the Chinese influence in Fiji<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Man Mohini Kaul, "India in New Zealand's Asia Policy" in *India and New Zealand in a Rising Asia*, Pentagon Press, 2012



## People driven

What more than two decades of fluctuating stability in Fiji have done is boost migration to Australia and New Zealand in particular. By coincidence 1987 was also the year in which New Zealand introduced a more liberal immigration policy that put the emphasis on skills and qualifications rather than country of origin. Further enhancements to both the education and immigration policies have followed. The cumulative effect has been an expansion of the number of people of Indian origin in New Zealand, from just over 2,000 in 1951 to 30,000 in 1991, 62,000 in 2001 and an estimated 170,000 by 2016 - nearly 4 percent of the population.

With that has come a discernible impact on New Zealand's own arts, culture and media, greater economic linkages with India, and Indian representation in Parliament and local government amongst several parties. Dame Sukhi Turner served as Mayor of Dunedin from 1995 to 2004, and in her last year received India's Pravasi Bharatiya Samman award. New Zealand's first Governor-General of Indian descent - Sir Anand Satyanand - served from 2008 to 2012. The son of parents born in Fiji, Sir Anand was the chief guest at India's annual conference for overseas Indians, Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas, in 2009, and a recipient of the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman award in 2011. The awards were an honour for New Zealand. So too was the appointment of John Wright as the first foreign coach of the Indian cricket team in 2000. Another major sporting step was the introduction of India's Premier League cricket. It has projected a succession of other New Zealand cricketers onto India's TV screens and underscored India's commercial anchoring of the global game.

Paralleling these people linkages has been an increase in economic ones, underpinned by New Zealand's increasing openness to trade and the impetus from India's 1991 liberalisation, global IT success and Look East policy. New Zealand's education and immigration policies are closely linked, and tourist numbers have been on a consistent rise - boosted by some timely Bollywood exposure. The value of trade in services now exceeds that of trade in goods. It really is all about people now. But by comparison with New Zealand's formal links with ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and China, aspects of New Zealand's relationship with India look underdone, and out of kilter with those same people ties. This is despite our common membership of regional organisations such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit. What we might jointly do about it is the subject of a separate paper.

*For more information please see [India and New Zealand: Growing our connectivity](#), by Graeme Waters, published October 2016 on the Asia New Zealand Foundation's website - [www.asianz.org.nz](http://www.asianz.org.nz)*

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