

## A people reunited - Fiji Times Online



Govind Singh accepts a tabua, whale's tooth, on behalf of the descendants of the indentured labourers during the Rewa Day celebrations in Syria Park, Nausori yesterday. Picture: JOVESA NAISUA

A new chapter has unfolded in the history of the people of Noco in Rewa, in Fiji's history and the descendants of the girmitiya who were shipwrecked at Nasilai reef in 1884.

In an emotional and a moving chapter, more than 100 descendants of girmitiya gathered at their first-ever Rewa Day celebrations at Nausori's Syria Park to witness the love that was rendered to their ancestors by the people of the district of Noco when they were brought to Fiji as indentured labourers.

Although it happened 132 years ago, the remains of this tragic incident always bring back memories for those who lost their ancestors and it was always their hope that one day someone would tell them what had transpired.

The Syria arrived in Fiji on May 11, 1884, carrying 497 passengers who believed they had left their homes for greener pastures. To remember those girmitiya who lost their lives in that tragedy, we embark on a journey of discovery looking back at the incident involving that 1040-tonne iron sailing ship and events related to that day.

On May 11, 1884 the Syria carrying 497 indentured labourers approached the coast of Viti Levu after 60 days of sailing from Calcutta.

The ship had left Calcutta on March 13, 1884 carrying adults, children, infants, and a crew of 43 (including 33 lascars.)

Its journey to Fiji seems to have been remarkably uneventful except for a minor storm as the night closed in and the wind and sea rose. But all was supposed to be going well until about 8.30pm when breakers were seen to the leeward side of the ship.

This was reported by Pranesh Nageshwar in The Fiji Times on May 11, 1984 where he stated the Syria was a fully rigged iron ship with a length of 207.7 feet, breadth of 34.1 feet and depth of 20.8 feet.

Constructed by William Pile of Sunderland for the Nourse Line, and named after the Syria River in Karnataka, India, the ship was primarily used for the transportation of Indian indentured labourers to British colonies.

Because of the swell, Syria was carried up past the edge of the Nasilai reef despite attempts to put the ship about.

No one on the ship, not even Captain Charles Belson had the faintest idea as to the precise location of the vessel, a heavy sea that night ran into Syria and broke bodily over her, smashing in all her boat (lifeboats) and sweeping the decks.

It's believed that about 11.30pm crew members, the engineer, carpenter and another European with three lascars (Indian crew) were sent to Levuka to report the disaster and get help.

Faced with great difficulty they managed to get about five miles through the shoals on a falling tide as they anchored for the night.

The next day, the group continued their journey in the morning and arrived at Levuka in the afternoon.

After the matter was reported, a ship known as the Union Steam Ship Company's Penguin was sent to fetch Syria's passengers.

When they arrived at Nasilai at noon, the sea was much lighter and the tide had fallen considerably with women, children and those who were injured being the first ones to be carried to the waiting boats. Locals in Nasilai also assisted the passengers to shore and provided them with shelter.

Of all that was happening that fateful day, Nageshwar reported that perhaps the most moving scene was that of 10 men who were left to their fate on a sandbank.

Unfortunately, later attempts to find the men failed and they were presumed to have drowned.

And those who lost their lives in the shipwreck were 32 men, 15 women, five girls, three boys and two babies.

Sashi Kiran, a descendant of the girmitiya and someone who has been following the course of events for many years shared that in an emotional turmoil of events, they have finally come to know that they are the children of Noco, they belong with them.

After four years of hard work and trying to re-establish links between the girmitiya and their ancestors, they were then finally assured by the Tui Noco, Ratu Isoa Damudamu, that they should proudly refer to themselves as kai Noco.

"For us it was a very emotional moment because we have never heard people of the land say 'You belong to us'," the FRIEND Fiji director said.

"We tried to absorb for a few days what we had been told and we didn't run to the media right away because we thought it was their story to tell so we invited him (Ratu Isoa) and ask him 'would you share your story right away'?"

"I was then invited at the End of Indenture Symposium at USP so I said that instead of me talking, can he (Ratu Isoa) speak?"

"Ratu spoke and he said it was time to re-establish links because the story has always been there.

"It's us, we didn't know, our people never went to develop a vanua relationship. He told us that our ancestors had developed the relationship with them and it's us who haven't establish that relationship."

Sashi's quest of more than four years saw her going to the provinces of Rewa and Tailevu until she was finally told the people of Rewa would be the best to share the story behind the shipwreck of the Syria.

"We went through the Rewa provincial office and it went on like that for four years and we sent message to the vanua and this year we received a message from the vanua and we took our sevusevu to them and presented the tabua.

"Ratu then told us 'You are welcome, you are children of Noco'.

"He then relayed stories of how their grandfathers had told them to look after their people and everyone on their land and we have always heard the stories of Indians buried here and they are part of you.

"So when he invited us to be a part of the Rewa Day, we were so glad and we even met the Marama Bale (na Roko Tui Dreketi). She also reassured us that were welcome to be a part of Rewa so here we are and because we owe it to our ancestors, we would do our traditional gratitude to Rewa."

Sashi, while sharing stories of her ancestors with older men and women of Noco, was touched by accounts of how her ancestors were given proper burial by the people of Noco.

"Now you can imagine the indigenous people, imagine them back in the days, our ancestors were drowning and dying and your ancestors reached out to them.

"They did not bury them in one cave like they would do with slaves in most cases, here we are told of how they were given one cave each for burial and we are very touched by the humanity that existed," Sashi shared.

That humane behaviour, she said, was way beyond what the British did.

She also shared stories of how the people of Noco went to rescue the girmitiya straight after the Syria was wrecked on the Nasilai reef on the night of Sunday May 11, 1884. They did not wait for any directive from colonial officials.

"Your ancestors started going out and rescuing people. What does it say about humanity? And for me, that is very important and I have been looking at the people relationship between the vanua but when you think about it, we have some deep relationships.

"Your forefathers made that relationship happen and even see to individual burial grounds."

Sashi also shared stories of how the early Fijians of Indian descent would run to iTaukei villages when things were really bad for them and the chiefs actually helped those going through a lot of difficulties.

Sashi said when politics was removed, the people to people relationship was built hundreds of years ago.

Ratu Isoa said they had always had that relationship and he was glad the link had been revisited.

For a couple of weeks, a group of the Girmitiya descendants who had learnt about the story from the Tui Noco were emotionally silent and asked themselves questions, do we even belong here?

"Vanua gave us more than what we expected."

"It has been amazing to be here, we are all part of the Noco family, the feeling of racial intention did not even exist and they have been so welcoming and they have really been looking after us, we drink grog and tea together."

Ratu Isoa, during the End of Indenture Symposium hosted by The University of the South Pacific on June 28, said the indentured labourers had been well-fed and looked after by the people of Noco.

"They were clothed, sheltered and provided with places to rest and sleep before they were transported by other rescue boats while some walked through villages to be transported by colonial government officials to Suva," Ratu Isoa said.

He also said the story had been passed on to the next generation by his grandfather Ratu Timoci Sauvoli, who was a youth at that time.

He said people from the 10 villages in the district of Noco, Rewa took part in the rescue and also in the burial of those who had perished, near their coastline.

"Some were buried at koro o Tauluga while some were buried at Waiwai. The land used for burial belongs to the Tui Noco and the other site belongs to Naivilaca Village," he explained.

Ratu Isoa said those who perished were accorded traditional burial rites.

"The bodies of our dear beloved Indo-Fijian relatives who were buried in those special burial sites for 132 years turned into soil and have become seeds of everlasting relationship, establishing that they belong to Noco, the Ratu na Tui Noco, the people of Rewa, the Gone Marama Bale na Roko Tui Dreketi and the people of Fiji," he stated.

The people of Naivilaca were given a medal of appreciation from the Girit Council in 1984 when the Syria monument was established at Syria Park in Nausori, 100 years after the disaster.

Ratu Isoa said on Friday during the Rewa Day celebrations that Christianity, which had reached Noco in 1840 — 44 years before the Syria was shipwrecked, played a major role in the lives of their ancestors.

Descendants of the girmitiya now fully appreciate that they are a part of Noco and Rewa and will make sure the ties of more than 100 years will now not be dormant.