

## CHAPTER 25. THE INDIANS AND PAKISTANIS

### Population and Location

Since the Indian and Pakistani minority groups in the Republic of Vietnam are small and are frequently lumped together with other Asian minorities under the general term "Hindus," it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics for them. Prior to World War II, the number of Indians in Indochina was estimated at 6,000, with the largest concentration in the area then called Cochin China and a smaller group in Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> In 1953 an estimated 5,000 Indians and Pakistanis were living in Vietnam. In 1963 there were believed to be "several thousand" Indians and Pakistanis in the Republic of Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

These groups are concentrated primarily in Saigon-Cholon' and in provincial towns where they engage in commerce and related occupations, often in competition with the Chinese.<sup>3</sup>

### Origin and Emigration

A large part of the Indian population came from France's colonies in India; the rest are Moslems from Northern India, Chettyars (also called chettiers and chettys) from South India, and Parsees from the Bombay area.<sup>4</sup> The Vietnamese do not distinguish between the Pakistanis and the Indians or between the northern and southern Indians, but call them all "Malabars," the name of the western coast of South India.<sup>5</sup>

Indian emigration is "as old as the Indian maritime enterprise."<sup>6</sup> Some scholars believe that Indians had reached southern Indochina even before the Christian era.<sup>7</sup> According to Ptolemy's geography, by 50 A.D. Indian colonization and commerce in Indochina were already extensive. Early immigrants were largely traders in rare commodities; subsequent immigrants have been, for the most part, laborers, moneychangers and petty traders.

The greatest influx of Indians and Pakistanis occurred after the arrival of the French in the 1880's; hence, the Vietnamese associate them with the country's conquerors. In addition, many of these Indians were French citizens from France's colonies in India, and as such qualified for government posts closed to the Vietnamese.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the French attempted to control Indian immigration; in 1948 they levied on each Indian immigrant a "personal tax" in the form of an immigration fee. Although this tax was

later rescinded because of protests from the government of India,<sup>9</sup> no Indian was permitted to enter the country unless someone already in Vietnam assumed responsibility for him.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Political Activities**

A source of Indian unpopularity in Vietnam was the allegedly unscrupulous moneylending practices—low security and high interest rates—of the Chettyars, who made up a large part of the Indian community. Moreover, the French accused the Chettyars of fomenting political disturbances in Indochina. The French used this as the reason for ordering five Chettyars to leave the country. The order was later rescinded, but not without first antagonizing the Chettyars.

During World War II the Japanese tried to rally dissident Indian elements to the Indian Independence League which they had organized in Indochina. This anti-British, anti-American Indian "freedom movement" was first established in Berlin in 1941 by Subhas Chandra Bose, a left-wing nationalist extremist. In 1943–45 Bose headed a "provisional government of free India" in Singapore, Rangoon, and Bangkok. This "government" organized the "Indian National Army" (Azad Hind Fouz) composed of Indian deserters, prisoners of war, and Indians domiciled in Japanese occupied British territories, to fight with the Japanese on the Burma front.<sup>11</sup> Several years later, Bose tried to raise a voluntary brigade in India, to fight the French in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> However, the Indochinese branch of the "freedom movement" was of little significance because the Indian population in Vietnam was both too small and, on the whole, too poor to be of any substantial assistance to the movement.<sup>13</sup>

In September 1945, Radio Viet Minh made several appeals for Indian support. The following month it issued its appeals, in the name of the "Fighting Committee of the Revolutionary Peoples of Southern Indochina," to the Indians serving in the British army of occupation. In December 1946, Radio Viet Minh alleged that some Indians in Hanoi were fighting on the side of the revolutionists, and that Indians in Saigon-Cholon had sent 40,000 piasters to Ho Chi Minh as well as a "touching letter of solidarity."<sup>14</sup> However, two months later, Nehru declared that no Indians were fighting in Indochina, as far as his government was aware.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Political Organization and Orientation**

In the past, the Indians and Pakistanis were organized in "congregations" apparently based on religious orientation. The heads or chiefs of these organizations were the recognized representatives of the various communities and served as links between the groups and the Central Government.<sup>16</sup> When Ngo Dinh Diem

abolished all congregations, the mosques and temples took over their administrative functions for the Indian and Pakistani communities.<sup>17</sup>

The Indians and Pakistanis outside their native countries are reportedly apolitical and content to live under almost any government. Whenever they have felt their existence had become unbearable in a certain place, they easily shifted to another Asian location and re-established themselves.<sup>18</sup> One of the reasons for this mobility has been the fact that most of the Indians and Pakistanis residing in Southeast Asian countries are men, many of whom maintain families in India; their residence overseas is temporary, as are their alliances or secondary marriages.<sup>19</sup>

#### **Religion**

The Indians are predominately Hindu and the Pakistanis are mostly Moslems. Marked cultural and religious differences separate the two groups. In the past, the Moslems were organized, at least in Saigon, in exclusively Moslem congregations. Only a few Moslems, most of whom are wealthy merchants, are Shiites who do not mingle with other Moslems; the rest belong to the Sunni, a more orthodox Moslem sect. There is a great feeling of solidarity among the Moslems who hold the same religious beliefs, attend the same mosques, participate in pilgrimages to Mecca, and have a spiritual rapport with the rest of the Moslem world.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Economic Organization**

Despite cultural and religious differences, the Indians and the Pakistanis engage in the same or parallel businesses, such as fabric bazaars, drygoods stores, pharmacies, grocery stores, jewelry shops, and restaurants. Many moneylenders, middlemen, and night watchmen and guards for apartment buildings and billets are Indian or Pakistani.<sup>21</sup>

Some occupational divisions have been noted among the Indians and Pakistanis. Under the French, a large number of Indians were civil servants employed as clerks, postmen, policemen, and registrars. The most important members of the Indian community, the Chettyars, were at one time organized in 120 business firms, primarily in the Mekong Delta; they controlled a large part of the export trade, owned a fourth of the country's riceland, and built rich temples throughout Vietnam. In the 1930's, when they began foreclosing on mortgages, the Chettyars became so unpopular that the French established their own credit facilities and threatened to deport some of the Chettyars. Consequently, before World War II, the Chettyars transferred 65 per cent of their capital out of the country. However, their investments in Vietnam were still substantial after the war.

Some Tamilians, members of the Dravidian race and mostly Hindus, are engaged in the piece goods business. Hindus from the United Provinces work as milkmen and cattle merchants. Sikhs, members of a Hindu sect founded in 1500 A.D. in the Punjab region, and Moslems are usually watchmen and guards. Sindhi merchants from Karachi (people, mostly Moslems, from Sind, India), engage in the silk and curio business.<sup>22</sup>

The financial success achieved by the Indians and Pakistanis has created some Vietnamese resentment. Hence, except for business contacts, the Vietnamese rarely mingle with them, making difficult their assimilation into Vietnamese society.<sup>23</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

1. Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *Minority Problems in Southeast Asia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1955), p. 120.
2. "South Viet-Nam," *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations: Asia & Australasia*, edited by Louis Barron (New York: Worldmark Press, Inc., Harper & Row, 1963), p. 371.
3. Maj. A. M. Savani, *Visage et images du Sud-Vietnam* (Saigon: Imprimerie Française d'Outre Mer, 1955), p. 163.
4. Thompson and Adloff, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
5. Savani, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
6. C. Kondapi, *Indians Overseas 1838-1949* (New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs, 1951), p. 1.
7. H. C. Darby (ed.), *Indo-China* (Cambridge, England: Geographical Handbook Series, 1943), p. 135.
8. Thompson and Adloff, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
9. Kondapi, *op. cit.*, p. 203.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
11. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, H. C. Raychaudhuri, and Kalikinkar Datta, *An Advanced History of India* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1956), pp. 991-992; "Subcontinent of India-Pakistan," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, XII, (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1965), p. 157.
12. Thompson and Adloff, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
15. *Ibid.*
16. S. A. Waiz (ed.), *Indians Abroad Directory, 1934* (Bombay: The Imperial Indian Citizenship Association, 1934), p. 135.
17. Col. Frank O. Blake, Interview, January 1966. [Former Chief of Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Saigon.]
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*; Savani, *op. cit.*, p. 164.
20. Savani, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
21. Blake, *op. cit.*
22. Kondapi, *op. cit.*, p. 1; Waiz, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
23. Savani, *op. cit.*, p. 164; Blake, *op. cit.*

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