

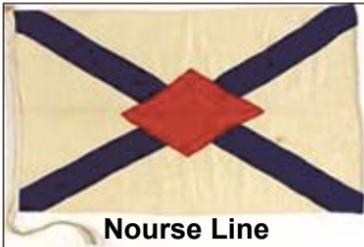
EditorialTime



THE Auckland Times
Your Monthly Independent Indian Newspaper
Local, National, Pacific & Overseas News * Classified, Advertisements, Games & Sports
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Remembering S S SYRIA

One hundred and twenty five years ago, on Sunday 11 May 1884 the S S Syria struck the reef near Nasilai, Fiji. Over four hundred Indian indentured workers were on board. Sixty lives were lost at sea that night – a tragic end far away from India in the Pacific Ocean.



The ship's captain and his crew failed to stop a collision with the reef, precipitating the end of the vessel. The memory has remained in the hearts and minds of people, especially those of Fiji and India, as well as Indian migrants from Fiji who settled elsewhere.

The Fiji Association in Auckland Inc made a wonderful contribution in 2007, to mark the memory of the Syria. In selecting to draw a hundred year old tree root from the sea and presenting an ornate image carved from it to the Manukau Memorial Garden Crematorium was perhaps a rare, imaginative way to remember the incident. It was a project undertaken with the support of Maori elders.

The bench has a pride of place in the foyer of the Crematorium, with a brass plaque in Hindi and English. The Crematorium serves as a final pathway for many Indian families who take their deceased loved ones there for final rituals. It is a good place for people who gather to view the bench and to briefly reflect on the demise of the Syria and Indians who left their homelands but never made it to Fiji.

To commemorate the 125th anniversary of the Syria's loss, the Fiji Association with support from the NZ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the New Zealand High Commission Fiji, has offered an Essay Competition to Fiji secondary school students, with cash prizes and awards of nearly ten thousand dollars.

This is to be warmly commended and the organizers congratulated.

It is another imaginative way to help remember and pay tribute to the helpless men, women and children who left India on 12 March 1884 but went to their watery grave near Fiji on 11 May instead of a new life in the islands of the sun as they had planned.

No doubt students in Fiji will reflect upon many aspects of the Syria and engage in useful conversations with each other in their participation and enjoyment of the essay competition. The announcement of the essay competition comes in the week long celebrations in the small township of Nausori where Fijians and Indians recall the anniversary in Syria Park. It is not the first occasion the Association has assisted students in Fiji. In 1979 an essay competition was offered to celebrate the international year of the child, grants of books have been made regularly among many practical ways to assist.

The Auckland Times hopes to publish some of the essays if the Panel of Judges of the Fiji Association would deem this to be appropriate when the competition is over.

SIR WILLIAM MCGREGOR 1846-1911

How many people know that the heroic efforts of Dr William McGregor and a group of Fijian villagers saved so many Indian indentured workers in 1884 when the Syria went down? Using small Fijian canoes, they went again and again to pull helpless Indians from the raging ocean, determined to save as many as they could. McGregor was awarded the Albert Medal for bravery for his efforts and the Fijian group was also recognized by the Governor of the colony.



Sir William McGregor

A major road in Suva Fiji bears

the name of the good doctor. But the story does not end there. Dr McGregor went on to serve in other parts of the empire, most notably Queensland, Australia where he became Governor from 1904 to his retirement to Scotland. His many efforts for academic development saw institutes of higher learning established in Queensland under his patronage.



Albert Medal

A ward of Brisbane Australia bears his name – McGregor district, from where the Mayor sends his greetings to the Fiji Association in Auckland as it recalls the Syria's demise in the essay competition.

His Worship writes that as Auckland and Brisbane are already sister cities and share many projects, this becomes another milestone. This is such a great way to renew like links of the past with our Australian neighbor, with a special link to Fiji and India as well, something few would have thought of.

From Scotland, a small rural school in Towie, Aberdeen, sends a message of delight – they too bear the memory of McGregor and were well pleased to hear of the project that in part, remembers their famous pupil.

In India, news that the memory of the lives lost at sea in 1884 of its citizens, far away in the Pacific, brings further appreciation, as students recall a perilous time in the history of Indians who were taken to work in plantations of various colonies, including Fiji.

These signal a warm vote of gratitude to the adjudicators of the competition and to the Fiji Association, the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and secondary school principals in Fiji who accept the invitation to participate.

Such a worthy endeavor reminds us that though the Syria was lost in 1884, the men, women and children of India who drowned, remain in our prayers and thoughts, as do those poor souls who struggled on after the disaster, despite physical and mental sufferings, to work in the sugarcane fields of Fiji. Also the brotherhood established as Fijian villagers went to save Indians from the wreck of the Syria.

One hundred and twenty five years later we salute them all and thank the Fiji Association's leaders for providing the opportunity of remembrance.

LEST WE FORGET 1884-2009

The Syria sailed from India, hopeful souls rejoiced
A new land to see, good fortune desired
Crowded decks, yet many new friends to find
The unknown Fiji Islands forever in mind

A moonlit night, stormy seas so scary
Fiji, oh Fiji, let us reach you safely
The reef is struck, hopelessness everywhere
Where is the crew to take us somewhere?

Save the women and children, don't let them fall in the fathoms
Help the weary men, so many struggling in the choppy waters
Broken masts, dismantled boards, destroyed lives
From India to here, no hope in sight

Oh take us Mother Ganga, take us if you must
Our lives to you Goddess we entrust
Our cries someone will hear
Someday, somewhere, forbear

The Syria goes down to bear
A heavy casket for us to share
Live well our families in India
We rest in these Pacific waters forever
Our fellow travelers who survive
We pray will find a land without strife

Oh loyal Syria you bow and sink over our watery grave
No funeral rites, no special names to engrave
Together we rest, eternity no less
Time ceases, only peace and rest.



Remains of Syria ... the ship that brought indentured labourers to Fiji

125th Anniversary S S Syria-Essay Competition

TO COMMEMORATE THE 125TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LOSS OF THE STEAMSHIP SYRIA NEAR FIJI, THE FIJI ASSOCIATION IN AUCKLAND INC HAS OFFERED AN ESSAY COMPETITION TO FIJI SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS. THE PROJECT IS CO-SPONSORED BY THE NEW ZEALAND HIGH COMMISSION AND MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF NEW ZEALAND.

Association Secretary Mrs Shona Kamath said "In 1979 the Association arranged an essay competition to mark the international year of the child, the winner of that contest in Fiji was given an opportunity to spend some time in a New Zealand secondary school. Other essay competitions have also been offered from time to time in New Zealand and Fiji. This year we decided to mark the Syria anniversary by offering some opportunities among Fiji secondary schools for participation by discussing the events of 1884 and to apply some relevance of it to their lives and to the national character."

Two winning essays will be awarded a cash prize of \$500 each. Several prizes of \$300 each will be made. Ten awards of \$200 will also be given to those in the excellent category. Prizes will also be awarded to a range of essays in the third category with \$100 prizes. The project, costing about ten thousand dollars was announced by the New Zealand High Commission and the Fiji Association.

Books will also be given and special certificates. A Panel of Judges has been appointed to be chaired by the project leader Dr Satendra Singh, and includes Lady June Hillary, wife of late Sir Edmund Hillary.

Dr Singh said the judges may decide to award other special prizes at their discretion.

The vessel was carrying indentured Indian workers bound for the Fiji plantations when it struck the reef near Nasilai, thirty miles from the Fiji coastline.

Sixty people perished. However, many more were saved in efforts led by the local medical doctor in Suva, William McGregor and Fijian villagers around Nasilai. They went in canoes to assist the drowning Indian passengers.

Dr Singh told *The Auckland Times*, "The loss of the Syria was a distressful time, embedded in the hearts of generations thereafter. It is important to recall the event and to take lessons from it. A New Zealand vessel visiting Fiji at the time with cargo was among those which responded. The perilous seas made attempts of rescue by the large steamships impossible. The brave attempts of Dr (later Sir) William McGregor and a group of Fijian villagers saved the lives of many drowning Indian nationals that day."

Essays will be received from students who are currently attending registered secondary schools in Fiji. Entries require to be certified by the schools. They can be sent to the New Zealand High Commission, Suva. Dr Singh said it is expected that once winners have been selected, the embassy will notify schools and students concerned. Dr Singh remarked "We are grateful to the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Acting High Commissioner in Fiji for facilitating winners to a special reception



NZ Foreign Minister, Hon Murray McCully,

Continued to the next page ...

Indentured workers 125 years ago



Indentured workers 125 years ago

EditorialTime



Essay adjudicators Lady June Hillary and Dr Satendra Singh. Lady Hillary says "looking forward to the essays"

.....Continued from last page where certificates and prizes can be presented to those able to attend."

The S S Syria had a largely uneventful voyage from India to the Pacific.

As the vessel neared the Fiji coastline near the island of Viti Levu, the immense storm and the lack of precise movements by the crew perhaps led to the vessel hitting the reef at Nasilai.

The Syria could not be turned around. Some crew went in the only surviving lifeboat to seek help but the vessel broke. Passengers – men, women and children were tossed into the raging seas.

The helplessness and panic, injuries sustained led to sixty deaths, with eleven more deaths subsequently in Fiji from injuries.

Dr Singh said "The heroes of the day were the many Indians who withstood the choppy waters for hours, some clinging to the fallen vessel as she slowly descended into the ocean. Without a doubt, Dr McGregor and his support team of Fijian villagers also. Without their intervention, the death toll would have been far greater. Those rescued were given food and clothing by Nasilai Villagers. One can only imagine the devastation and anguish of our people who faced such a tragedy."

Dr Singh said there was another interesting aspect which had presented itself in offering the project. He said "Sir William McGregor served with distinction in Queensland after his term was completed in Fiji. The McGregor Ward of Brisbane serves as a reminder of his achievements. From there, we have received a very kind message from Brisbane City, pleased to be associ-



Brisbane's Deputy Lord Mayor and Councillor McGregor Ward, Cr Graham Quirk says "Sir William would have been deeply honored to know his deeds long after his death are still recognized."

ated in such a trip down memory lane. I was also deeply moved to receive a message from Scotland, where Sir William was born and went to school. It is heartening to know that we can recall such events and be linked in spirit by others in so many different parts of the world, including India and Fiji. We cannot undo history but remember and reflect on such episodes as the tragic loss of the Syria, those who perished, those who survived the ordeal and went on to make lives for themselves despite the sufferings of the indenture system."

REMEMBERING S S SYRIA

- 1010 ton, iron sailing ship
- Length of 207.7 feet, Breadth 34.1 feet, Depth 20.8 feet
- Built by William Pile of Sunderland for the Nourse Line
- Named after the Syria River in Karnataka, India
- Launched in 1868
- Primary use to transport indentured Indian workers to the colonies
- Voyages to Trinidad (1872/1873/1877/1878) Nevis 1874, Fiji 1884

DESTRUCTION

The Syria ran aground on the reef at Nasilai, Fiji at 8.30pm on Sunday 11 May 1884.

This was seen as the worst sea disaster in Fiji waters.

The Syria left Calcutta on 13 March 1884 with 497 Indian workers.

It is believed on reaching the Kadavu area near Fiji, the Captain and his senior crew failed to take into consideration the raging seas, strong winds and currents prevailing, taking the vessel nearer to the reef in error.

At 8.30pm the Syria struck the reef.

The ship's mast was broken, its sails ripped, ropes and materials tossed into the raging seas. Most of the passengers were similarly thrown into the ocean, confused, panic stricken.

The Fiji Acting Colonial Secretary, also the district doctor, took charge of rescue efforts, supported by a group of Fijian villagers. They rescued drowning Indians in Fijian canoes.

Of those rescued, a further eleven Indian workers died in the weeks that followed, from injuries sustained.

Capt Cromarty, of S S Penguin, a New

Zealand steamship wrote these words- "The Penguin left Suva at 12.30 same night and found the stranded vessel at Nasilai Point on the extreme point of the reef, midway between Suva and Levuka. The vessel lay on the edge and a fearful sea was breaking clean over her.

A number of people could be seen clinging to the wreck but unfortunately it was quite impossible to render them any assistance. It was utterly impossible for the steamer to approach her. It would have been certain death for any boat's crew to have gone into the break churned to white angry foam by the coral reef...the unfortunate immigrants were in imminent danger of being washed off the vessel."

Capt Cromarty returned later when the seas subsided but by then there were no passengers in sight. The small Fijian canoes had dived in and out of the

raging seas, rescuing passengers over and over again.

Dr Singh said "One hundred and twenty five years ago a brotherhood was formed at the Syria wreck, between Fijians and Indians.

It is important to recall this. The Syria itself disappeared and in time the Nourse Line became a part of other flagships.

I was grateful that its descendant, the Union Line was supportive of our memorial remembrance. Students will certainly have many avenues to write upon."

The Essay Competition for the vessel tragedy ends on **20 August**, when the Fiji secondary school term comes to a

close. Until then, teachers of English will be able to relate classroom discussions to the Syria and encourage students to submit essays on whatever aspect they wish.



Leaving India to seek fortune



Indentured labourers waiting at Calcutta for ships

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