



## Review of *Invisible: New Zealand's history of excluding Kiwi-Indians*

Edwina Pio<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Auckland University of Technology, 120 Mayoral Drive, Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand

Corresponding author: Edwina Pio (edwina.pio@aut.ac.nz)

Academic editor: Katie Cooper ♦ Received 13 March 2022 ♦ Accepted 6 April 2022 ♦ Published 1 August 2022

**Leckie J (2021) *Invisible: New Zealand's history of excluding Kiwi-Indians*. Massey University Press, Auckland, 248 pp.**

Jacqueline Leckie has been researching and writing about Indians in Aotearoa New Zealand for many decades, and she has a deep knowledge about their history. Her current book *Invisible* published by Massey University Press, presents a rather disturbing, but important history of discrimination and racism, which has been persistent since Indians arrived on British sailing vessels in the 18<sup>th</sup> century right to contemporary times. As Leckie notes in the first chapter, the book “is not offered as a solution to persistent racism and discrimination” but it lays bare dark and unsettling aspects of New Zealand's history and leaves readers to sit with the discomfort of that legacy. Themes such as discriminatory immigration policy, discrimination at work, casual and informal racism are explored across seven chapters.

The first chapter is on the Indian diaspora and exclusion, and it highlights narratives of invisible existence and insidious experiences of exclusion. In chapter two, the various immigration acts and their amendments are explored, as are fears over the influx of Asians. Chapter three provides information on the White New Zealand League and exclusions of Indians, who were often viewed as a threat to white civilisation. Chapter four focuses on various aspects of organisational discrimination. For example, Indian fruit and vegetable sellers faced numerous and continual attempts by councils and retailers' associations to stop them in their trade, and coloured aliens were also excluded from union membership. War and welfare is the title of chapter five, which exposes the contradictory relationships between Indians in New Zealand and the state. Successive governments from the late 1890s ushered in legislation designed to restrict Asian immigration, yet Indians served in the Great War and Jagt Singh, a trooper with the New Zealand Mounted Rifles, was decorated with the British War medal, the Victory Medal and the 1914–15 Star for

bravery in the Dardanelles Campaign. Moreover, despite paying taxes it was only in the 1930s that Indians were able to claim social welfare from the state. In chapter six, Leckie highlights covert and casual racism and its persistence with everyday stereotyping and hostility. The final chapter, titled "Contemporary exclusion", indicates that New Zealand seems to have become kinder and more inclusive towards Kiwi-Indians, despite the continuing question of identity as to who is a "real" New Zealander, and phrases such as "go back to your country" still being directed at Indians.

Historians rarely discuss the history of Indian settlement in New Zealand. Whether this is intentional or not, the author notes that this invisibility “speaks to national histories written either through a white lens or with a bicultural framework of Māori and Pākehā applied; perhaps with Indians hidden in the footnotes or subsumed within the generalized past and contemporary discourse about ‘Asiatics’ or Asians in Aotearoa” (p. 16). This meticulously researched book goes some way to addressing that invisibility, and is ‘designed to be read as both a narrative of exclusionary practices against Kiwi-Indians and as a collection of selected documents of that history’ (p. 35). Leckie exposes blemishes in New Zealand's history of race relations and forces us to ask “Are we one?” Are we “a humane and inclusive nation?”

There are some missed opportunities and areas in which further research would be welcome. The analysis leaves much to be desired for it lacks a nuanced presentation of the day-to-day realities of what Kiwi-Indians experience in Aotearoa both among themselves and with the diverse peoples who live in this beautiful island country. In the 2018 census, approximately 231,099 individuals or 4.7 per cent of Aotearoa's population identified as Indian, an increase from 155,000 in 2013. As at 2018, 111,348 Indians in New Zealand were born in India. Despite the ongoing racism and discrimination abundantly evident in this book, Indians have chosen to live in New Zealand and have prospered here. Providing even a glimpse of positive stories would have given a more balanced perspective

on Indian migrants to New Zealand, and it would also have been useful to add a few more paragraphs on racism and discrimination globally and historically regarding diasporic Indians. In fact, definitions of these slippery terms racism and discrimination have not been provided and this would be a useful vantage point in a book that focuses almost exclusively on these concepts.

There are interesting biographies of individuals such as Badrudeen, called “Butterdean”, who was from Kashmir and was living in Otago in 1875. Pronunciation of names has often been a sore issue for Kiwi-Indian individuals. Some Indians chose to take names that were Anglicised because this eased their path in Pākehā society and could connote inclusion. The documents presented here are ripe for a manifold analysis of why names were changed or Anglicised, and would allow for multiple interpretations of why a person’s name was “mis-pronounced”.

The author has an interesting section on Islam in Aotearoa and notes that its establishment owes much “to the quiet and persistent observance and gentle advocacy of the Indian families that settled in Aotearoa during the early twentieth century” (p. 27). Here the nuanced aspect of Islam and Indian migrants is beautifully presented. There is a passing nod to how some Pākehā, and more notably Māori, exhibited friendship and manaakitanga (hospitality) towards Indians, but this is not developed.

Inevitably, in a book such as this focusing on exclusion, there is detailed information on Pukekohe where during the 1920s, the White New Zealand League emerged and reinforced aspects of discrimination against Indians. For example, Indian fruit and vegetable sellers had to battle with various councils and retailer’s shares associations, which sought to prevent them from trading. Kiwi-Indians did take up such racism with the government and the author has done well to cite such examples. Moving towards the current day, the author cites violent attacks since the 1990s on Kiwi-Indians operating dairies, superettes and liquor stores. Here again it would be useful to have some broader context on what the government is doing to prevent such attacks and why despite such attacks these shops continue to sell liquor and cigarettes.

The book notes that the question “Where are you really from?” is “one of the most insulting and exclusionary questions asked of Kiwi-Indians, or indeed any immigrant... It strikes at the very heart of belonging...” (p. 195). This is a complex matter, for while the question can be irritating, it can also mean that the individual is choosing to engage with the immigrant or Kiwi-Indian and this is not necessarily discrimination, but an opportunity to generously share information about the source country and also about the realities of being Kiwi-Indian. Being attentive to these complex experiences and responses would encourage a deeper understanding of the nuanced lives of individuals through the intersections of migration, colour, gender, accent and place of birth.

This book “is not offered as a solution to a persistent racism and discrimination. It does not address exclusion within Kiwi-Indian communities that may be based on

caste, religion, status and gender, as well as economic exploitation. The book does not explain 15 March 2019. Rather, it hopes to shed some light on how that tragedy could happen in a nation where the extreme outcome of racism ‘is not us’. Aotearoa New Zealand’s record of the exclusion of Kiwi-Indians is a legacy that challenges the nation’s view of itself as inclusive and open” (p. 15). Stories of exclusion have a fierce hidden power, and Leckie's book shares those stories to powerful effect. However this stark reality is also tempered by the fact that Indians have chosen to live in New Zealand and have prospered here, hence the large numbers of migrants from India to this day. The book does not present even a slice of this positive aspect which could provide a more balanced perspective on Indian migrants to New Zealand.

The book ends with a clarion call, stating: “Now it is time to shatter the invisibility of Kiwi-Indians from Aotearoa’s history and to acknowledge not only Indians as settlers within our nation but also the hardships and discrimination they have faced- and still do today” (p. 211). Discrimination, exclusion and inequality reflect socially constructed identities and interests that depend on circumstances and operate along the lines of sex, gender, colour, race, language, religion etc. These trigger various forms of prejudice or blessings. Our future is inescapably plural, for in the myriad shades of the colour line, we are all threads of the same skein of life. Stepping into this future, we need to move our minds and hearts from bias and prejudice to respect and appreciation for other cultures in the complex choreography of daily life within the family, society and organisation. Harmony and discrimination are part of being human and we need to recognise both aspects in our history in order to strategise for better futures.

### **Prof. Edwina Pio**

Recipient of a Royal Society medal, Duke of Edinburgh Fellowship and Fulbright alumna, Edwina Pio is New Zealand’s first Professor of Diversity, University Director of Diversity, and elected Councillor on the governing body of the Auckland University of Technology. Her research and doctoral supervisions encompass the intersections of work, ethnicity, indigenous studies, religion and pedagogy. A prolific writer, her research is published in leading international journals and media outlets and she has written over half a dozen books. Edwina has been appointed to the Ministerial Advisory Group pertaining to the Royal society recommendations on the Christchurch Mosque shootings. She chairs the Academic Advisory Board of Te Kupenga the Catholic theological colleges of New Zealand and has been appointed to the Rutherford Discovery Fellowship Humanities and the Social Sciences Panel. A woman of peace and prayer, a scholar of colour, and a passionately engaged educator, Edwina brings grace, gratitude, courage and thoughtfulness to governance, teaching, research, doctoral supervisions and stakeholder engagement.