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### Memorial Address: Reflections on Brij V. Lal

Doug Munro

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#### Abstract

*This memorial address reflects on the life and work of Brij Vilash Lal (1952–2021). Although best known for his scholarly commentary on contemporary Fiji politics, Brij was also a major historian of Indo-Fijian indenture and the indenture system generally. More recently, he was a valued colleague to those involved in the study of the global Indian diaspora. As well as his quantitative profile on the origins of north Indian indentured workers to Fiji, Brij followed them on to the plantations on wrote important studies on women, suicide and 'non-resistance'. I shall discuss these and relate them to his wider body of work which was people-centred, which stemmed from a personal engagement with his subjects, and which contained moral underpinnings.*

I will cherish the honour of being invited to present one of the keynote addresses at your conference. I am here today, after a 23-year absence from Fiji, to reflect on the life and work of 'our eminent scholar and wonderful friend', as Clem Secharan described the late Brij Lal. We were close friends and colleagues of 42 years, and I'll refer to him by his first name throughout my talk. What I want to do today is to relate Brij's work on Indo-Fijian indenture, in particular, and also his other work to his outlook on life and affairs.

That other work included scholarly commentary on contemporary Fiji affairs – for which he and his wife Padma were banned from Fiji by the Bainimarama regime on grounds that they were 'prejudicial to the peace, defense, and public security of the Government of Fiji'. All the familiar canards were trotted out. What nonsense! As a friend said in an e-mail, and forgive his language: 'Incredibly sad that Brij died in banishment – Those wretched buggers who did that to him, what miserably small vindictive minds'. I doubt whether the previous government would have allowed a celebration of Brij's life and work at this conference, had they got wind of it, as they would undoubtedly would have. But – Fiji now lives in more enlightened times thanks to the outcome of the December 2022 election, which came a year too late for Brij.

Brij left behind a significant body of writing on the Fiji *girmit* experience, exceeding that of anyone else, and an even larger corpus on contemporary Fiji history, as well as his creative writing (see Munro 2017a). But what sort of historian was he?

First and foremost, he was an unrepentant empiricist, with a devotion to archival research. A corollary was that Brij had little time for theory. But he had an implicit theory (or at least an approach to history). For one thing, he wrote a people-centered history (Corbett, forthcoming). More than that, he had to be intellectually engaged with his subject matter, otherwise it was an exercise in futility. Brij only wanted to write about things he felt part of in some significant personal way – a stance that reflected a quality of temperament as well as of imagination and commitment. He mentions on a number of occasions in his writings that as an undergraduate student at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in the early 1970s he felt immediate kinship and identification when introduced to books about Fiji that recounted situations with which he was familiar and people who he knew of. This was the real thing, in his view.

As well as intellectual engagement, there had to be moral underpinnings, which entailed an inescapable duty to speak out in the face of injustice. Silence was not an option -- and he paid for it. Instead, he took the view that declaring one's position was a moral duty. Not for him the spectacle of historians affect-

ing posturing as models of objectivity and neutrality which were simply a smoke screen to cover their own biases.

In *Broken Waves*, his history of 20th century Fiji, Brij emphasised: 'I make no special effort to invoke an impartiality I do not feel.... Critical attachment rather than cool detachment has guided my scholarly efforts here as well as my other writings' (Lal 1992: xvi–xvii). As the series editor pointed out in his preface to the book, '*Broken Waves* is a history with a point of view... Lal's own perspectives and value judgments are explicit, and he does not conceal his disappointment and even anguish over the failure to create a truly democratic multi-racial society' (Kiste 1992: viii). He found the direction of public life in Fiji increasingly intolerable. Increasingly he made use of the media to get his views across. I recall staying with the Lal family on a visit to Canberra when yet another crisis broke out in Fiji and Brij being contacted over the phone by any number of journalists wanting to tap into his expertise. To complete the equation, there was an appreciation of good writing and good literature, the result of having good teachers at Labasa High and at USP.

Such was the cocktail of influences and convictions that went into the formation of Brij V. Lal, the historian. As an aside, Brij actively engaged in autobiography and creative writing. I've already written about these so I won't repeat myself here (Munro, 2017b). For the moment, though, we can note that his initial specialisation in *gimit* history was gradually overtaken by a consuming passion for the contemporary history of Fiji.

This line of inquiry was *not* in direct response to the Fiji coup of 1987, as is often supposed. It started five years earlier in 1982, when Brij was a young lecturer at USP. Out of the blue, he was asked to chair a series of radio panels on the 1982 election, and he found the experience very much to his taste. Indeed, his first publication on contemporary Fiji was an analysis of the election, published the following year in the *Journal of Pacific History* (Lal, 1983).

Leaving USP that same year to take up a tenure-track position at the University of Hawai'i, Brij edited a collection on the politics of contemporary Fiji, which appeared in 1986, the year before the first Fiji coup (Lal, 1986). Interestingly, Brij was by far the youngest and least senior of the ensemble of contributors, yet his own contribution was not one whit inferior to theirs. What this showed, if nothing else, was his self-confidence and ambition. He was a young man in a hurry, focused, determined to succeed, and driven partly by a fear of failure.

By this time, Brij had also commenced work on *Broken Waves*. It was firmly based on archival record, which is unusual in a general history. But the work was interrupted by the coup. Brij happened to be in Fiji at the time and he

first heard about it when researching in the National Archives of Fiji. (Yes, everyone will tell you where they were and what they were doing when news of the coup broke.) Being a reluctant onlooker to this slice of history in the making had a profound effect on Brij, not least witnessing Fijian nationalists attacking Indo-Fijians with sticks and rocks at Albert Park, Suva, on 20 May. He was appalled at the overthrow of a democratically-elected government; he never ceased to believe that coups, far from solving problems, created even more problems.

Back in Honolulu, Brij spent a few all-consuming weeks writing an account of the event. The words on the page came gushing out, as though on their own accord. *Power and Prejudice*, as he titled his book, was one of several 'instant histories' of the 1987 coup and is considered one of the two best such accounts, the other being that of Deryck Scarr who took an opposing position to Brij's (Lal 1988; Scarr 1988). To Scarr, the coup was the inevitable result of the perceived threat of Indian domination. Ethnic Fijians were defending what was rightfully theirs and their response was inevitable in the circumstances. Brij, on the other hand, gave the race card little credence. His thesis was the coup being 'more about frustrated politicians bent upon recapturing power lost in the polls than they were about ethnic prejudice, though the latter cannot be – and here is not – lightly dismissed' (Lal 1988: 7). It was a position from which he never resiled.

Turning to Brij's contribution to *gimit* history, I'll start by saying that my earlier comments about what type of historian was Brij apply equally to his writings on indenture and contemporary history – namely, the sense of engagement and the moral imperative.

Brij established his academic credentials as a historian of Indo-Fijian *gimit*. His PhD thesis, which was presented to the Australian National University in 1980 (when Brij was 28 years old) was a computer analysis of the 45,439 men and women from North India who entered into contracts of indenture for Fiji. A version of the thesis was published three years later as *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Lal, 1983b). Most of you will have some familiarity with the book that emerged from the thesis so I won't go into details, except to say that his findings overturned the conventional wisdom. In particular, he corrected the notion that the *girmitiyas* were of low origin, showing instead that they came from a wide cross-section of society. Subsequent studies of Indian indentured labour to other sugar colonies bear out Brij's conclusions (Bates, 2017: 14–15).

Brij saw value in quantification for enabling him to see the shape and dimensions of a historical problem. He also recognised what quantification didn't and couldn't do, and that was to answer questions relating to the inner

promptings of human motivation. For example, statistics can reveal the extent of mortality and its causes, but not the experience of dying. I asked Brij how he was able to engage in concentrated quantitative work that was both so tedious and so counter to his inclinations. He answered matter-of-factly, 'It was a PhD. It had to be done'. But once the thesis was submitted, he made his great escape from the world of quantification and returned to the humanistic history more in line with his inclinations.

By this time (1981) Brij was back at USP and he spent every available opportunity at the National Archives. The major results included three important journal articles on specific aspects of the plantation experience and a book chapter of a more general nature titled 'Labouring Men and Nothing More'. The latter appeared in the edited collection *Indentured Labour in the British Empire* (Lal, 1984). For whatever reason, Brij never republished this essay, as he did the others, and he seldom mentioned it in his subsequent writings, yet it is a major contribution. It covers the same broad territory as the chapters on plantation life in his mentor Ken Gillion's *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, except that Brij delved more deeply into the *girmitiyas* working and private lives (Gillion, 1962). And again, Brij showed his precocity. In conversation with the book's editor many years ago, she told me how reliable Brij was and that his chapter required little editorial work, unlike some of the others. Again, Brij was by far the youngest of an impressive line-up of contributors and he easily held his in their company.

The three journal articles, published in 1985 and 1986 after Brij had gone to the University of Hawai'i, were revisionary and each went beyond the conclusions offered in Gillion's *Fiji's Indian Migrants* (republished in Lal 2000: 167–238). They were written 'to underline the need for more 'micro studies' to 'deepen the scope of existing studies on the indenture experience' (Lal 2000: 197).

In the article titled 'Kunti's Cry', Brij sought to absolve the female *girmitiyas* from the received wisdom that they were the major cause of the ills of plantation life. For example, the high infant mortality rate, for example, was not a function of bad mothering but of the unsanitary conditions that prevailed on the plantations. Just as E.P. Thompson famously sought to rescue 'the poor [nineteenth century English] stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' handloom weaver, the "utopian" artisan' ... from the enormous condescension of posterity' (Thompson, 1963: 12), so did Brij rescue the poor Indian woman labourer from the enormous sanctimony of posterity. Ken Gillion didn't actually say that women were the root cause of problems on the plantations, but neither did he say that they were not.

The second article ('Veil of Dishonour') continued the rehabilitation of *girmitiya* women who were alleged to be the major cause of the high suicide rates on plantations. The paucity of women (28% of the workforce) and their supposed licentiousness and infidelity produced such a degree of sexual jealousy that the males were frequently driven to commit suicide or else to murder the women. Again, Brij demonstrated that the '[t]he focus of the supposed immoral character of the women conveniently detracted attention from those conditions on the plantations that promoted sexual jealousy and the murders' (Lal, 2000: 202).

Two further points can be made. 'Veil of Dishonour' came about because Brij discovered an unpublished 'Register of Deaths of Indian Immigrants' that identified all the suicides and provided the serial number on their Emigration Pass, his/her name, the name of the plantation, the date of indenture and the date and cause of death. From there, he was able to delineate what had been going on and to correct the prevailing stereotype. Until commencing research on suicide in New Zealand (e.g. Weaver and Munro, 2009), I never quite appreciated just how sophisticated Brij's own work on suicide is. His careful tabulations of suicides by caste, time span, and geographic origins are exemplary, as is his attention to cultural nuances.

Second, the discovery of the unpublished register demonstrates the value of archival research – if indeed further demonstration is necessary. As Brij confessed, before finding the register he had found the sexual jealousy explanation persuasive, as evidenced in 'Labouring Men and Nothing More' (Lal, 1984: 148; Lal, 2000: 236n.9). Reliance on the written record, both archival and published, inexorably led to that conclusion.

The final article of the three was 'Non-resistance on Fiji Plantations', where Brij accounts for the lopsided balance of power resulting in employers being able to exert oppressive and exploitative control over the workforce. Rather than mount futile campaigns of resistance against overwhelming odds, the *girmitiyas* overwhelmingly acquiesced. This seemingly runs counter to Brij's repeated insistence that *girmitiyas* exercised agency. Rather, Brij was saying that acquiescence was an adaptive strategy. Keeping a low profile, not sticking their heads above the parapet and flying under the radar gave the workers wriggle room for a degree of agency and above all for survival. There was also a moral dimension. Just as Brij was dismayed by the treatment of women labourers, there is a strong undercurrent of censure in 'Non-resistance' at what some Indians did to other Indians. In particular, he deplored the use of *sirdars* (Indian overseers) to enforce discipline and production schedules. What he found reprehensible was the *sirdars*' abuse of their own people.

Brij wrote very little on indenture after 1986. Instead, sometime in the

1990s, he increasingly gave attention to the wider post-indenture Indian diaspora (starting with Lal, 1996). I never asked him about this change of course but I can offer suggestions for it. He may have felt that he had done his dash and had said all he had to say on indentured labour. *Chalo Jahaji*, his volume of collected essays, was his indenture swansong: ‘Every journey ... must end somewhere and as far as the Indian indenture experience in Fiji is concerned, mine ends with this book’ (Lal, 2000: xii). No longer living in Fiji, he was remote from his sources. Besides, contemporary Fiji politics was now his primary academic concern. A further suggestion is that working on the post-indenture Indian diaspora as a secondary interest didn’t require archival research but, instead, coming to grips with an interesting new literature with which he felt a sense of engagement. He was also getting invites to present conference papers on the diaspora in places as far apart as Holland, Mauritius and Suriname and meeting congenial new colleagues. It culminated in Brij being appointed senior editor of *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Lal, et al, 2006).

There was something else. Importantly, I suspect, it gave relief from the pain and sorrow of what was happening in Fiji, beginning with the profound disappointment at the result of the 1999 elections where the Rabuka-Reddy coalition was heavily defeated, followed by another coup exactly twelve months later. The 1999 election was the catalyst (Padma Lal, e-mail, 8 June 2023). Some fifteen years later he went on to say, ‘the grief is simply overwhelming at how we ended up where we are: in a cul-de-sac where the prospects of genuine democracy look exceedingly bleak, where guns, not good arguments, rule the day’ (Lal, 2015: 73–74). Writing about the Indian diaspora gave him respite from the depressing scenario in Fiji. Still, he never stopped writing on Fiji affairs, if only for posterity. His last journal article published a fortnight after his death, was a masterful reflective overview of Fiji’s political evolution, writing with insight and feeling about the land of his birth (Lal, 2021a).

Quite by coincidence, Brij’s last paper on indenture was published that same year (2021) – another overview essay, this time at the invitation of David Dabydeen, which appeared as the lead article in the pilot issue of the *Journal of Indentureship and its Legacies* (Lal, 2021b). It was part of the legacy that Brij bequeathed to the field of Indo-Fijian indenture studies. In addition to edited volumes (Lal, 1998; Lal et al., 1994; Lal et al., 2012), there was his Ph.D. thesis (later converted into a seminal monograph), four book chapters and eight journal articles, many of which were gathered between the covers of *Chalo Jahaji*. All but two of the journal articles and book chapters were published between 1977 and 1986. In the short period of approximately ten years, whilst of-

ten engaged in other writing, Brij wrote more than anyone else on Indo-Fijian indenture, before or after, leaving a corpus of work unlikely to be replicated in either quality or quantity.

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**Author:**

**Doug Munro** is former Head of Department of History at the University of the South Pacific. He is now an adjunct at the University of Queensland. This paper is a light revision of my address at the second plenary session at *Celebrating Girmitiya Lives*, Fourth Global Gimit Institute Conference, University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji, 12 May 2023. The conversational mode of the original presentation has been retained.  
Email: [munro47@yahoo.com](mailto:munro47@yahoo.com)