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Brij Lal's Subaltern Approach to the Study of Indian Indenture

Lomarsh Roopnarine

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Abstract

Following the publication of Hugh Tinker's, A New System of Slavery (1974), the field of indenture studies was dominated by the school of victimology, namely, that Indians were victimized by caste restrictions, patriarchal patterns, and an authoritative work routine on and off the plantations. However, by the mid-1980s, various studies started to challenge the aforesaid narrative. Brij Lal was at the forefront of this emerging academic initiative drawing upon archival sources as well as from the voices of the indentured Indians to understand what transpired on the plantations. This paper examines Lal's contribution to the above subaltern approach, notably, how the indentured peasants resisted and accommodated themselves in a conflict habituated plantation work amid bouts of success and subjugation. Central to this article is how Lal used a bottom-up approach to analyze the Indian indentured experience in Fiji.

Keywords: Brij Lal, subaltern, approach, indenture, Fiji

Introduction

In 1974 historian Hugh Tinker published a ground-breaking book titled *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labor Overseas, 1830-1920*. The book was seminal in three academic domains. The first was that it addressed and captured the Indian indentured experience across the globe from India to Mauritius, South Africa, Fiji, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. Before 1974, the published literature on Indian indenture revealed an insular approach. The second is that the book narrated a history of the indentured Indians on their side, investigating and assessing their negative experiences in the European-owned colonies reeling from the wrath of colonialism. The book departed from relying on positive explanations written and housed in the archives by the administrators of indenture. Third was that the book in a relatively short time had become an authoritative academic voice on Indian indenture, so much so that a Tinkerian model had developed. The book was not only unavoidable but also several emerging writers in the field of indenture studies followed and embraced the Tinkerian model. The book produced history and complemented the words of Raphael Samuel, 'History, in the hands of the professional historian, is apt to present itself as an esoteric form of knowledge' (1994: 3).

There is no denying that the labour ordinances within the indentured contract ensured that laborers were not only trapped but had to obey, and even surrender to, the demands of their contracts. By the mid-1980s, however, the Tinkerian proposition that indenture was a new system of slavery came under attack for being one-sided, essentially for presenting the Indians as victims of a ruthless labour contract system. In layman's terms, the laborers were presented like lambs waiting to be slaughtered, incapable of techniques on how to resist an unjust labour system. The questions like were indentured Indians locked into their plantation base, and were their indentured lives wholly based on work and confinement, began to take centre stage in the mid-1980s. The attack on the Tinkerian proposition was supported by the argument that when the labouring class is suppressed or when its aspiration for a better life about basic rights, wages, and overall treatment is denied, the entrapped will use any means possible, including migration, to improve their circumstances.

James Scott (1990), and others have argued that the subaltern – individuals from the subordinate class - were able to speak back to power through insurgency and resistance because they were the agents of change who drew upon their own day-to-day experience to challenge structural domination. The subaltern approach has brought a dialectical interest to the static view that the masses were unable to challenge their unjust conditions in the face of power.

Likewise, a case can be developed for the indentured Indians by arguing that, although Indians were traditional and communal people, they were also competitive individuals seeking their destiny within the confines of a controlled plantation system. Within this restrictive colonial power structure, they created innovative ways to migrate and improve their lives.

In this paper, I will use the studies of Brij Lal to show how he was one of the pioneering scholars to gradually depart from the ivory towers of the academy and focus more on the voices of the people rather than their subject institutions. I will use some of Lal's studies that were published in the mid-1980s that coincided with the development of the aforesaid dynamics. The articles used are 'Indian Indenture Historiography: A Note on Problems, sources, and Methods' (1983), and 'Kunti's Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations' (1985), as well as some of his essays and conversations he had with this author. The importance and significance of this paper are not merely to assess Lal's contributions to the task at hand but also how he had critically engaged and challenged hegemonic and lopsided discourses of Indian indenture. Toward that end, I structured this paper into three sections. Section One provides a brief contextual background of indenture. Section Two demonstrates how Lal's used the concept of history from below to understand indenture. The final section summarized the findings of the paper.

Historical background of Indenture

The abolition of slavery in most European-owned colonies across the globe in different periods in the nineteenth century brought about much pressure on the members of the elite plantocracy to find an alternative source for African slave labour that existed for three centuries. After many tussles among the British imperial government, the colonial Indian government, and the local government (colonial office) in the former slave-based colonies across the globe, Indian indentured labour was thought to be the 'answer' to the 'labor shortage' emerging from the abolition of slavery. Through the Act of 1837, revised in 1842, an estimated one million Indians were transported from India to former slave colonies of the world from 1838 to 1917 to provide indentured labour. Of this total, an estimated third of them returned to India while two-thirds of them stayed in their new homelands when their contracts expired. Surprisingly, an estimated 100,000 of them might have returned to their former indentured colony, although more sound research needs to justify this figure.

The laborers were pushed out of their homeland because of British colonialism, civil wars, revolts, taxes, and natural disasters such as famine and

floods as well as caste oppression, personal socio-economic bondage, abusive personal relationships, family disputes, adventure, duping, kidnapping, poverty, and unemployment. The majority (75%) of indentured Indians were low-caste Hindu males, while single women and Muslims made up a minority (25%). Indentured Indians were mainly peasants or unemployed individuals recruited in North and South India. They spoke a variety of languages and dialects, reflecting India's linguistic diversity.

Despite different experiences in each colony, there were some commonalities.

First, these bonded laborers had to provide their service to the European-controlled sugar industry with the hope of saving it from ruin, and in exchange, the laborers would become beneficiaries of their labor service, limited as they were.

Second, Indian indenture operated on a cyclical labor contract in that the planter class provided indentured laborers with labor, fixed wages, moderate housing, limited medical services, and free arrival and (return if another indenture was served) passage to indentured laborers. In exchange, the indentured Indian laborers gave their labour services to the planters for five years and in later years of the indenture period given an option to renew their contracts for another five years or return to their homeland. By the 1870s, or at least in the Caribbean, the time-expired laborers were given a small parcel of land to settle instead of their return passage to India.

Third, the latter option led to an unexpected direction, namely, the once-cyclical labour system was transformed into a settler scheme. A series of Indian settlements developed around a five-mile radius of the plantations creating an elastic lifestyle combining India and the overseas colonies regarding customs and ecology. Indians provided labor to the plantations as well as developed their communities through rice and cane farming, raising cattle and poultry, and the reconstruction of their customs and culture.

Fourth, during indenture, Indian culture and customs underwent change and continuity. The caste system disappeared while the Indian religions of Hinduism and Islam continued, albeit with some modifications.

Finally, when Indenture services officially ended in 1920, there was a recognizable indentured Indian diaspora in which Indians were building themselves and their communities without losing their connection with India. They were also beginning to stake their claims beyond their former indentured base with a reenergized sense of agency in post-emancipation societies replete with race and class antagonism. Specifically, in Fiji, indenture began in 1879, some fifty years when compared to Mauritius and the Caribbean. When indenture ended in 1916, over 60,000 indentured Indians were brought to Fiji, and of this

total, about a third returned home. 45,000 came from North India, 13,696 were females, 4.1 percent were Brahmins, 9.0 percent Kshatriyas, 3.0 percent Bania, 31.4 percent middle castes, 29.1 low castes, 2.8 tribal and 16.8 percent Muslims (Lal, 1983).

Contributions to Indenture

In 1983, when study of indenture was gradually moving from mainly European to Indian writers, Lal identified six of many interpretations of indenture.

The first were those writers who argued that indenture was a new system of slavery. The point may seem obvious. However, it is also important because it forces us to appreciate the immense work put into it to arrive at a new system of slavery thesis.

The second point is that 'there have been those scholars who have combined objective scholarship with deep sympathy', and have suggested that 'the emigrants [have] lost the sense of belonging and attachment, without in their lifetimes finding acceptance and recognition in their new homeland' (Lal, 1983: 34). The diversity of the indentured experience cannot be readily disputed.

The third is that most of the writings on indenture 'has been at a very general level' (Lal, 1983: 34). This declaration was accurate in the 1980s, and to some extent, still ongoing.

The fourth is that the focus of indentured studies was on the experience of the indentured Indians in specific colonies.

The fifth is that there was an exclusive reliance on conventional archival sources. Lal concluded that 'we have reached a point of diminishing return on the study of indenture' and suggested that we shift it from macro to micro for the sake of achieving a bottom-up approach. He warned that new sources would be needed to develop new insights and perspectives of indentured laborers. He continued that we should look with renewed potency at the most basic questions of history: 'What is accepted or assumed to happen' (1983: 35).

The sixth is quantification. According to Lal, the quantification approach 'offers another alternative to go beyond the traditional reliance on literary sources in trying to analyze and understand, perhaps more fully, the experiences of the unlettered masses who could not record their impressions and perspectives in memoirs, diaries, and letters' (1983: 36). This reasoning is manifestly Gayatri Spivak when she asked in the 1980s, can the subaltern speak for themselves, or who speaks for them.

To bring the readers up to date with the study of indenture since the

1980s when Lal was writing, some additional information is warranted.

Lal's interpretations of the study of indenture are still spot on. The studies of indenture still rely on original reports from colonial officials and immigrant agents' reports as well as monographs and books written by Christian missionaries and Europeans who were residing in the colonies during indenture. Lal is also correct in that the victimology aspects of indenture continue, not to mention that books published by reputable presses have allowed the derogative label *Coolie* of the Indian indentured to be topics and titles. However, the techniques of resistance/agency during indenture have been on the rise producing binary arguments about whether the indentured system benefited or brutalized indentured Indians.

Lal, however, did not foresee two interpretations of indenture, the call for more rare reports or writings of indentured servants themselves such as a series of letters written in the 1890s by Becchu, a radical indentured servant in British Guiana (Seecharan, 1999) and Munshi Rahman Khan's (1874–1972) autobiography, an indentured servant in Suriname (Prakash et al, 2005). Interestingly too, the study of indenture has come from scholars of Indian descent in the 'second' diaspora. The study of indenture has been since the 1980s insular, however, lacking comparative analyses as well as evolving from Euro to Indo-centric trends. There is also the claim that the study of indenture has entered a stage of terminal crisis in Guyana, the second largest recipient after Mauritius to have received indentured Indians. There have not been in the past decades any identifiable persons actively researching and writing on indenture.

The question to ask and analyse at this juncture is, how did Lal address and weave these interpretations in his writing? In his article *Kunti's Cry*, he demonstrated by using the bottom-up approach that Indian female workers in Fiji were not responsible for social ills brought on themselves and the wider plantation environment such as suicide, and murder, and argued that the 'system of coercive labour with all its attendant consequences rather women themselves produced the problems that bedevilled indenture' (1985: 56).

What Lal painfully was trying to tell us is that we should shift the focus on blaming the indentured Indians and pay attention to the conditions that produced the social ills on the plantations. This argument was against an avalanche of writings and opinions at a time when indentured Indians were at fault. They were perceived by their overlords and entourage to be prone to irrational decisions emanating from their customs and environment. Lal challenged these assumptions and took stories and testimonies of indentured women in the case of Kunti and wove them into his analyses like a thread meandering in the labyrinth of the indentured world waiting for exposure and action. The art of doing so from the bottom up teased out the hidden, if not suppressed

voices, of the subaltern indentured and juxtaposed them with the superior, providing readers with sources to make their interpretation as to what transpired during indenture in Fiji. To illustrate in the case of suicide, Lal espoused that

The general isolation and loneliness of the plantation life were a factor in some cases. Many newer migrants found the relentless pace of plantation work, from dawn to dusk, five-and-a-half days a week all year round too oppressive to cope with, descended into depression, and took their own lives (1985:60).

Lal continued: in the case of murder, the focus on the supposed immoral character of the [Indian] women conveniently ‘detracted attention from those conditions on the plantations that promoted sexual jealousy and the murders’, (1985: 62).

In effect, these analyses were revolutionary in the 1980s, breaking away from the victimology thesis of indenture. All this occurred in tandem with the belief that resistance in Fiji during indenture was limited at least when compared with other indentured colonies and that the indentured Indians lacked the individual and collective consciousness, the unitary and hegemonic characteristics to challenge their existence. Therefore, they were perceived by their overlords as ventriloquist dummies who were not only voiceless but were responsible for their problems. What Lal revealed instead was that Kunti’s plight was one of many Indian women who suffered injustice on the plantations. By amalgamating micro sources, Lal demonstrated that injustice on the indentured Indians was not all self-inflicted by customs but by the deplorable conditions in which the indentured lived and worked. Moreover, the silence of the indentured was not a submission to injustice since silence based on imagined egalitarianism in and by itself was a form of resistance and testimony, the secret of the subaltern survival. The acts of acceptance and even accommodation also have the potential to occur within the ambit of repudiation and power.

Spontaneity

Lal noticed in the records of indenture in Fiji, including sporadic voices, that organized leadership, which Tinker labeled as ‘lackey leadership’ was readily unidentifiable. The indentured Indians did not, like in their ancestral home, develop the appropriate attitude for effective leadership. The position is compounded by the thought that the indentured were sojourning in Fiji and saw

no urgency to resist since, in their minds, they would leave the plantations and return home when their contracts expired. This was a sort of psychological resistance coupled with patience and the suspension of expressed dissatisfaction. Their position can be defined by using an analogy like a group of people standing somewhat together at the roadside bus stop. They appeared to be together by the fixity of purpose to take the bus. However, when they entered the bus, they moved to seat themselves separately dismantling the makeshift togetherness. It is believed, at least rhetorically by pessimists of indenture that the above analogy sutured the entire indenture system from India to the colonies and even back to India. The absence, and later assertions, too, of effective leadership posed a serious challenge to the understanding of how indentured Indians coped with their day-to-day existence on the plantations.

Every group, despite how fragmented and suppressed, is generally guided and governed by some form of leadership based on makeshift fraternal relations as well as the tolerance of difference and incommensurability among themselves. There is always some degree of determinism to push back against total entrapment and bondage. Arguably, the subaltern indentured Indians were always searching for ways to negate the ideals of the sugar plantocracy – the service or surrender doctrine – imposed on them. Leadership among the subaltern, as so defined by Antonio Gramsci (1971), is often developed without any creative educational activity but by common sense and instincts known as spontaneity. Mobilization among the subaltern is not based on the motive to overthrow the power structure but to sort out the weakest links and use them advantageously. Likewise, the characteristic nature of indenture foisted either directly or indirectly a status of evenness rather than the proletarianization of sectorial antagonism and unevenness among the different castes and religions of the laborers. There was, to some extent, a flattening of experience that was brought about by common suffering. By logic then, and even in the face of the divide and rule ideology from the ruling class, some level of camaraderie among indentured would lead to spontaneous actions concealed to be submissive but was a mutuality of shared consciousness.

The spontaneity of the indentured day-to-day existence has important implications in understanding their daily struggles, and by extension, the motives and inner sanctum of their minds. Lal illuminates that we must examine spontaneous leadership and indeed oral evidence. He declared:

One way to obviate the problems of the range, quality, and representativeness of oral evidence may be for indenture historians to turn more towards oral tradition, folksongs, legends, and anecdotes than has thus far been the case. These are generally more representative of the human condition they portray, not least because they have to be remem-

bered and transmitted from one generation to the next, thus keeping oral traditions closely in tune with the changing feelings of the people (Lal 1983: 36).

Crispin Bates reinforced these views stating that the dependency on archives and ‘administrative priorities mean that we commonly lose sight of the exceptional and creative groups and who individuals who found means’ including spontaneous, ‘to resist structural violence and contribute towards the building of the new societies that emerged in the multiple destinations of Indian overseas migrants’ (2017:3).

Quantification

Brij Lal is perhaps the first, if not the only researcher, in the 1980s to have used quantification to analyse Indian indenture. In a nutshell, quantification is when a researcher gives a numerical value to measuring a social phenomenon in the social sciences. The process involves collecting and analysing data numerically to understand relationships and links among variables (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Notwithstanding the criticisms (see Bridenbaugh 1963), one merit of quantification is that it reduces generalizations and increases precision. Lal suggested that quantification ‘offers another alternative’ to the dependency on literature and can fully understand the masses since they ‘could not record their impressions and perspectives in memoirs, diaries, and letters’ (1983: 36).

This author is particularly moved by quantification, and although he did not read Lal’s earlier studies on the aforesaid, he serendipitously shared similar sentiments some five decades later. He declared:

One of the frustrating aspects of Indian indentured historiography in the Caribbean is the inconsistent and possibly inaccurate numerical statistics in published studies on the topic. Scholars studying indenture seem to accept that 500,000 Indians were brought from India to the Caribbean from 1838 – 1917 to work as indentured servants. Of this total, one-third returned while two-thirds stayed in the Caribbean...but there is no study to justify the accuracy of these statistics...[and subsequently], published studies on indentured Indian statistics in the Caribbean, when carefully analyzed, bear out the common facetious quote about statistics: there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics (Roopnarine 2014: 394-95).

In Fiji, Lal used quantification not to fill all the blind spots of indenture but helped to correct the misrepresentation of the immigrants’ backgrounds. He used caste, the core social structure of the immigrants, to determine their background and how this social structure was transformed in Fiji, a study that will be useful to researchers in the Caribbean and elsewhere. By coding and transcription, Lal deconstructs (1983: 46) the myth that indentured Indians in Fiji were mainly from the low caste; actually, his research shows 52.3 percent, more than half of the immigrants were of higher and middling castes as well as that the immigrants were not non-migratory before indenturing themselves to Fiji, an ongoing myth in the whole indentured experience.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this paper is to tease out some unique and pioneering contributions of the late scholar Brij Lal made to the field of indenture studies, notably, his contributions in the 1980s when the field was gradually moving away from the school victimization thesis of indenture to accommodation and resistance based on micro analyses or the dynamics emanating from voices or the subaltern rather than from the superior. Additionally, Indians who had become settlers, residents, and citizens in their new overseas homeland were, in many dimensions and domains of life, waiting for fresh interpretations of themselves by examining their historical experience in anticipation of what they had become. It was a period of tremendous awakening for them.

Lal demonstrated that indenture was not shaped by one but many experiences that required multi-partite analyses to better understand the one million Indians that were brought to various parts of the world to service European-owned plantations. In many ways, Lal demonstrated that the two main different schools of thought of indenture, negative and positive, cannot easily be uncoupled since both are like peas in the same pods, our ancestral experience.

Today, these contributions may appear mundane to the average person interested in indenture since the field has developed so much since the 1980s. However, Lal’s contributions, as discussed in this paper, have not displaced the historical analyses of indenture that preceded the articles discussed here. His study of the indenture, like Hugh Tinker’s, led him to detour into analyses, and certainly open more avenues for future research to explore, thereby, giving legitimacy and a new lease of life to indenture studies. Lal was concerned with not necessarily what had happened but with what happened and how it should be narrated. He will continue to occupy a coveted academic space in indentured studies and provide ongoing relevance to indenture, namely, informing emerging and established scholars on how to study indenture, and consequent-

ly, enriching the field. The challenges Lal identified and wrote about were not only historical and methodological but also ideological. The future may witness more analyses, but they would certainly be influenced by Brij Lal's studies.

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Author:

Lomarsh Roopnarine, originally from Guyana, is Professor of Caribbean and Latin American History at Jackson State University, USA. He is author of *Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Resistance and Accommodation, 1838-1920* and *Indian Indenture in the Danish West Indies, 1863-1873*. Email: lomارش.roopnarine@jsums.edu