Editors’ Introduction

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Brij V. Lal (b. 1952) has always had both of his historian-trained eyes on the present. His unabashed emphasis on the here and now—what he calls ‘bearing witness’—makes him inimitable among his discipline. It also made compiling this Festschrift a challenge. A Festschrift is many things: part intellectual biography, part book review, part memoir, part reflection, part tribute. This book is all of those. It also fundamentally marks the passing of time in a way that both defines and transcends its subject. Brij’s work, always contemporary in its outlook, always pungent with political overtones, captured the ideas, individuals and events who were at the heart of a particular postcolonial moment. That moment is passing. In reflecting on Brij’s contribution, this volume offers the opportunity to consider what it meant.

Reading across each of the contributions collected here, we are struck by the fact that Brij’s life and work embodies a particular postcolonial paradox; his achievements are laudable but his writing is forever tinged with regret for the opportunities lost and chances squandered. These themes emerge most clearly in the present volume in the three republished interviews about contemporary Fiji. The first, conducted in 1996 when Brij was one of the three Constitution Review Commissioners, exudes a cautious confidence that a better future was possible. The second was conducted four months after George Speight’s coup in May 2000 and Brij dispassionately analyses the unfolding situation. The third interview, in 2015, is more the voice of despair that the situation is probably beyond reprieve for the foreseeable future. He also expresses disquiet at the state of the discipline of Pacific History and of academic life generally. Combined, this genealogy speaks to the intersection of both achievement and regret that in retrospect seems an inevitable consequence of Brij’s steadfast desire to ‘bear witness’.
Brij is what the English would call a ‘scholarship boy’, one of those lads from the provinces who would not have received a tertiary education but for their fees and allowances having been met through the award of a competitive scholarship (Harrison 1995: 65–82). It started with a Canadian Third Country Scholarship, in 1971, to study at the recently founded University of the South Pacific. Thus did the boy from the back blocks of Labasa, whose parents were illiterate, start on the journey that would lead to a stellar career as an historian of the Pacific Islands and especially of Fiji. He is not simply the most distinguished graduate of the University of the South Pacific but would grace the roll of graduates of any university in the world. For over 30 years, Brij has moved purposefully through the major periods of Fiji’s history. As well as having 10 academic monographs to his name, he has been involved with some 30 edited collections, including *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopaedia* (Lal and Fortune 2000), *The Encyclopaedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Lal, Reeves and Rai 2006) and *British Documents on the End of Empire, Series B, Volume 10: Fiji* (Lal 2006). As well as guest editing three special issues of journals—*Contemporary Pacific* (Lal 1990), *South Asia* (Brennan and Lal 1998), and *The Round Table* (Lal 2012)—he has published five volumes of his collected essays. The academic monographs alone exceed 3,000 pages, all-up.

It is an extraordinary output. His first book was the revision of his PhD thesis (*Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*, 1983a, reissued 2004), but the emphasis thereafter has increasingly focused on the political history of twentieth-century Fiji, including political biographies of A.D. Patel and Jai Ram Reddy. His first journal article appeared in 1977 and in the ensuing decades his productivity has not slackened, as demonstrated by the chronologically organised bibliography that is appended to the present volume. In addition to his own work, Brij was the founding editor of both the *Contemporary Pacific* and *Conversations*, the series editor of the University of Hawai‘i Press’s Topics in the Contemporary Pacific Series, review editor of the *Journal of Pacific Studies*, and a long-term member of the *Journal of Pacific History*’s Editorial Board, which included several terms as a joint editor. Then there is the supervision of postgraduate theses and his involvement in rejuvenating the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau. Suffice to say, his influence over a generation of scholarship has been enormous.

Brij is fond of quoting the great Australian historian Ken Inglis to the effect that ‘A lot of history is concealed autobiography’ (Inglis 1983: 1). The description exactly captures the extent to which his own writings are
forged through a specific mind intersecting with particular experiences. This conjunction of mind and matters means that History, for Brij, is not so many dispassionate words on paper but the recounting of real and lived experience. Brij, moreover, needs a sense of involvement and attachment before he can warm to a subject. In his earlier work on the indenture system in Fiji he found a topic where the heart and the head came together: his choice of subject stemmed from relevance and a sense of rendezvous with his own roots. As Brij explains in the 2000 interview (republished in the present volume), he has ‘to be emotionally engaged with something to be intellectually engaged with it’. There is more to it. His writings on indenture contain a strong argumentative line, often accompanied by a moral stance: the labourers were exploited and women labourers especially so; labourers soon learned not to engage in confrontational resistance to the plantation system; women were not the major cause of the high suicide rates on the plantations (Lal 2000: 167–238).

The nexus between manner and matter applies to Brij’s work on the contemporary history of Fiji in particular. He started writing on the subject well before the 1987 coups. But the coups did impart a sense of urgency and fuel the moral dimension of his work. He said in his 1996 interview, ‘there is something fundamentally wrong and immoral about deposing a duly elected democratic government through a military coup’, and he has not deviated from that position from that day to this. When Broken Waves, his history of twentieth-century Fiji, appeared in 1992 as a volume in the Pacific Islands Monograph Series, the series editor pointed out that it:

is a history with a point of view; it is neither impartial nor ambiguous and may well provoke controversy. 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).

So, Brij’s readers can be assured that what they see is what they get. There is no question of his flying in under false colours.

The section in this book on ‘Fiji Politics’ contains four substantial chapters—by Robert Norton, Martha Kaplan and John Kelly, Yash Pal Ghai, and Stewart Firth—and the underlying motif of each is that public and political affairs are largely mediated through the prism of race, whether the issues at stake are decolonisation, the electoral system or constitutions. Or, as Brij has said elsewhere, ‘Fiji is an ethnically
divided society where public memory has long been racially archived’ (Lal 2015: 59). There are reminders in the chapters on ‘Fiji Politics’ of Brij’s role as observer, commentator and participant in the political affairs of the country. What started as an interest in the 1982 election (Lal 1983b) intensified with the 1987 coups. His deepest immersion was his role as one of the three members of the Reeves Commission to review the 1990 Fiji constitution. For the most part, however, Brij’s role has been that of chronicler of contemporary Fiji. Although he feels uneasy at being labelled a public intellectual (Lal 2011: 4), that is what he is: he has recognised expertise and an acknowledged reputation (or cultural authority), he is willing to express his views in a variety of media, and he has a constituency (Collini 2006: 52). ‘Scholarship’, he writes, ‘should, as a matter of moral duty, speak truth to power; silence can never be an option’ (Lal 2011: 138). But speaking truth to power can be a dangerous thing; as Stewart Firth points out (in this volume), the Bainimarama regime has ‘created a new and unprecedented political atmosphere, in which criticism of the government became treasonous’. In 2009, Brij was detained, roughed up and given 24 hours to leave the country (Lal 2011: 303–06).

In effect, he had been ‘grounded’—unable to return to the country of his birth and where his academic interests lay. Prior to this event, however, Brij commonly used the metaphors of travel to denote both historical processes and individual experiences—‘journey’, ‘odyssey’, ‘voyage’, ‘banishment’, ‘sojourn’. Journeys usually involve changes of direction, hence one of Brij’s ‘faction’ books was entitled Turnings (2008). More recently, the term ‘intersections’ has been added to his lexicon—those often happenstance criss-crossings between life and events—or as Brij puts more precisely, the ‘series of haphazard intersections between the primitive and the modern, colonial and postcolonial, past and present, and scholarship and political activism’ (Lal 2011: 321). It is the themetic range of his interest, both historical and literary, that drives the present volume.

Echoing this, quite by chance, three contributions focus on Brij’s first book, Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians, a quantitative analysis of the 60,965 Indian indentured labourers who left for Fiji. Goolam Vahed and Clem Seecharan both recount the personal and professional impact the book has had on them, whilst Ralph Shlomowitz and Lance Brennan reflect on the influence of Girmitiyas on their own work and on wider scholarship. It is extraordinary that a young man’s book can have such an
The irony is that Brij turned his back on the methodology upon which his start to fame rests; at the first opportunity he escaped the world of quantification and returned to the documentary and humanistic research from which he had started.

Thus, the two essays in the section on ‘Literature’ reflect Brij’s preoccupation with the authenticity and beauty of good fictional writing. His own forays into creative writing have attempted ‘to capture the inner truth rather than the factual accuracy of an experience’ (Lal 2011: 119). For this reason, he insists that his quasi-fictional writing still involves his skills as an historian; and ‘art of the historian’ in fictional writing is the subject of a reflective tribute by close comrade-in-arms Tessa Morris-Suzuki. The other chapter in the section on ‘Literature’ by Doug Munro moves from the general to the particular in surveying Brij’s autobiographical and creative writing and tracing his attraction to these genres.

The final section of this volume contains a selection of tributes from friends and colleagues, which reveal a many many-faceted life. These chapters are too diffuse to even think about summarising, and neither is there any need for summary; they are there for the reader to savour. In the spirit of a Festschrift we conclude our Editors’ Introduction by quoting the final sentence of the final chapter, by Brij’s student Sam Alasia, who writes: ‘Enjoy your well-earned retirement with your family and tagio tu mas [thank you very much]’. Those sentiments are shared by us all. The contributors, and many more besides, will join in thanking you, Brij, for your massive contribution to scholarship, for your friendship, and for the memories.

References


This text is taken from *Bearing Witness: Essays in honour of Brij V. Lal*, edited by Doug Munro and Jack Corbett, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.