

# ‘For the loser now will be later to win’<sup>1</sup>

Doug Munro, University of Queensland

In a professional lifetime spanning more than 40 years, Brij Lal has written about Fiji and the wider Indian diaspora. He has almost completely confined himself to such specialisations for two reasons. One is that the heart and the head must come together. There has to be immediacy and a sense of involvement before he can warm to a subject. Quite simply, his choice of subject matter stems from relevance to himself and an engagement with his roots. Furthermore, he doesn’t want to intrude, as he sees it, on other people’s histories. It’s an entirely personal decision and he does not object to so-called outsiders studying and writing about Fiji. The result of Lal’s 40-plus-year journey into the history and politics of Fiji is a body of writing, notable in equal measure for its quality and quantity. He is bearing witness to his time and place. The impact of his work on his chosen fields will endure.

Selections of this corpus have been presented in three volumes of collected essays. The first—*Chalo Jahaji*—is concerned with the indenture system in Fiji and speaks eloquently of the 61,000 labourers from India.<sup>2</sup> The second—*Intersections*—is testimony to Lal’s versatility.<sup>3</sup> Its chapters include autobiography; tributes to others (such as Sir Paul Reeves, the chair of the 1996 Constitution Review Commission, of which Lal was

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1 Bob Dylan, “The times they are a-changin’”, on *The Times they are A-Changin’* (Columbia Records, 1964), line 17, lyrics available from: [www.bobdylan.com/songs/times-they-are-changin/](http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/times-they-are-changin/) (accessed 10 April 2019).

2 Brij V. Lal, *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey of Indenture through Fiji* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 2000; Canberra: ANU E Press, 2012), doi.org/10.22459/CJ.12.2012.

3 Brij V. Lal, *Intersections: History, Memory, Discipline* (Suva: Fiji Institute of Applied Studies, 2011; Canberra: ANU E Press, 2012), doi.org/10.22459/IHMD.11.2012.

a member); discussions of the political situation in Fiji; his thoughts on the deteriorating quality of university life; and broad-brush treatments of the wider Indian diaspora.<sup>4</sup> The book you are now reading is the third, a sequel to *Intersections*, but the emphases are different. Apart from two interviews, the autobiographical content is subsumed in various chapters rather than being chapters in their own right; there is more on the wider Indian diaspora; there are also examples of Lal's creative writing; and, above all, there is more coverage of contemporary Fiji politics.

Here we come to other measures of motivation. What makes Lal keep on writing about the seemingly lost cause of Fiji politics? He explained in *Intersections* that, although he is first and foremost an historian:

the tumultuous events in Fiji over the last decade have pulled me back to the present, and a considerable part of my time and energy is spent on commentary and analysis of contemporary events in that country. This is time consuming and often repetitive, but it is a responsibility and an obligation that I cannot escape, nor would I want to. Silence in the face of oppression is not an option for me, nor is the defence of democratic values and the rule of law a crime.<sup>5</sup>

It is not that Lal wants, or even tries, to be the conscience of the nation, but there are better ways to go about governing a country.

To read the various political essays in this volume as they emerged over a period of years was sobering enough. To read them sequentially in two or three sittings elicits a more sombre reaction. That is, how could Lal keep on writing about a subject matter so depressing and an unfolding scenario so distressing, recording the unexpected twists and unforeseen turns of Fiji politics as they go from bad to worse—where the rule of law and the independence of the press and judiciary, not to mention the spirit of the constitution, are ridden over roughshod? How does one maintain a sense of equilibrium on a daily fare so cheerless and disheartening? Then there is his (and his wife Padma's) banishment from Fiji since 2010, on the spurious grounds that they are a threat to national security. If the powers that be thought they were going to silence a vocal critic, they completely misjudged the effectiveness of their action.

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4 *ibid.*

5 *ibid.*, p. 5.

The negative feelings are moderated by the other subjects that Lal writes about, which you'll find in the first part of this book. Much of it is excursions into the realm of creative writing, which he finds ultimately more satisfying than his academic writing. Here he can let his imagination roam in giving voice to the ordinary people—their hopes and struggles—who are not the usual habitués of history books. Besides, there is life beyond sitting in front of a computer screen or scribbling away. Solace also comes from the joy of reading and his love of good literature, not to mention the happy distraction of watching cricket and enjoying his grandchildren. The inspiration and support from friends has been crucial, for there is no denying the heartache of seeing dreams of a better Fiji disappear, the pain of exile and the ordeal the family has gone through.

Although the political situation in Fiji remains grim, it could be worse. At least there has been nothing like the St Bartholomew's Day massacre, the climax of the French Wars of Religion in 1572. Coming to more recent times, there have been no equivalents of the Reichstag fire, the Night of the Long Knives and Kristallnacht. Speaking of the Nazi onslaught, one is reminded of the lines in Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*: 'Where there's hope, there's life. It fills us with fresh courage and makes us strong again.'<sup>6</sup> These words are too hopeful for Fiji's immediate future and it might be thought that Lal is one of the losers in history. As well as being banned from Fiji, his words go unheeded—although not unresented—by the authorities. Then, again, it's worth remembering that nothing is set in stone. It recalls the words of Bob Dylan's "The times they are a-changin'": 'And don't speak too soon / For the wheel's still in spin.'<sup>7</sup> So, how will 'history' judge the present Fijian Government? When its members lose office, they will suddenly discover that the status and the perks have everything to do with the job and nothing to do with them personally. They will then discover who their 'friends' really are. It's a fair bet that Lal's writings will outlive their deeds and the tables will be turned—or, as Dylan said, 'For the loser now will be later to win'.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Anne Frank, *Het Achterhuis. Dagboekbrieven 14 Juni 1942 – 1 Augustus 1944* (Amsterdam: Contact Publishing, 1947); *The Diary of a Young Girl*, trans. Barbara Mooyaart-Doubleday (New York: Doubleday & Company; London: Valentine Mitchell, 1952), entry for 6 June 1944.

7 Dylan, "The times they are a-changin'", lines 14 and 15.

8 *ibid.*, line 17.

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