

5. 'End of a Phase of History'

Writing the life of a reluctant Fiji politician

Brij V. Lal

The author who speaks about his own books is almost as bad as the mother who talks about her own children.

Fiji is an ethnically divided society where public memory has long been racially archived. This raises particular questions about what to write and from whose perspective; it turns 'insider' into the 'outsider', and vice versa. In this chapter, I reflect on writing the life of one figure, Jai Ram Reddy. He was the dominant leader of the Indo-Fijians from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s when his political life ended in a massive defeat and he departed the political scene for good. The post-independence years were deeply fraught for Fiji in general and for Indo-Fijians in particular. Independence had been achieved peacefully in 1970, but the colonial-era race-based constitutional architecture adopted then, and the values and assumptions which underpinned it, effectively consigned Indo-Fijians to a life of prolonged political opposition from which escape seemed well-nigh impossible. Fijians would control the levers of power if they remained united, and Indo-Fijians would be invited to the table of national decision-making on terms and conditions determined by the ruling elite. Tokenism was the order of the day. When Indo-Fijians finally managed, in partnership with a small number of indigenous Fijians, to win power at the ballot box in 1987, they were rudely removed from office after only a month by a military coup in the name of protecting indigenous interests. There then followed a dark period of political persecution, rampant racism and religious bigotry against Indo-Fijians on a scale never seen before. Mercifully, common sense returned a decade later in the form of an amicably negotiated multiracial constitution in 1997, but its life was cut short by yet another military coup a decade later. But that is a different story.

As the leader of his people, Jai Ram Reddy witnessed this tumultuous series of events at close quarters. His life might therefore afford close and intimate glimpses into the processes of politics in this period as well as insight into the personalities who drove them. I had watched Reddy intermittently from a distance from the 1970s to the early 1990s, and cannot recall more than a couple of very brief conversations with him during that time. My first meeting with him had begun on an inauspicious note. I met Reddy at a farewell party hosted by a friend in Lautoka on the eve of my departure for Hawaii in July 1983. Reddy was aloof, but later in the evening he bore into me. I had written an assessment

of the 1982 general elections in which I had suggested that if the National Federation Party (NFP) had not widely distributed a controversial *Four Corners* video alleging misuse of Australian aid money by the ruling Alliance Party, implicating Prime Minister Ratu Mara in the sordid affair, it might have won the election.¹ In other words, associating the party with the video too closely was a bad strategic move. Reddy was livid: 'Who the hell are you to write such rubbish? I have had it with you academics, sitting on the sidelines and making carping comments. I am not going to waste my breath talking to you.' I was sufficiently perplexed by the encounter to note it down in my diary. But it was not anger and disappointment that remained with me over the incident, rather a vague sense of respect; respect for a man who stood by his words and deeds. He was in possession of certain facts which he felt duty bound, as Opposition Leader, to make available to the public irrespective of political consequences for himself or his party.² He did the right thing, was I so obtuse not to see that? I have had disagreements with Reddy on subsequent occasions but learnt not to take these personally. Most people who have had any close association with Reddy will tell a similar story of sudden eruptions of anger at some perceived slight or difference of opinion, but the disappointment evaporates quickly.

For several years, living in different countries and pursuing separate careers, we lost all contact until the 1987 coups. I became a vocal critic of the coups (as I have remained ever since) and wrote a book about them as well as a general history of Fiji.³ I was to discover much later that Reddy had read some of my writings, not always with complete approval it has to be said, though he spoke approvingly of my account of Fiji's first military takeover. But there was no correspondence, no talk – political relationships in Fiji are like that, people are bad at writing. In 1993 I was asked to address the annual convention of Reddy's NFP in Nadi. This was unexpected. Political conventions were, and still are, partisan political affairs to re-energise the party faithful with stirring rhetoric about possibilities and potentials, not a place for sober political discourse. I gave a carefully prepared talk on the flaws of the 1990 Constitution and the need to create an inclusive, non-racial political culture in Fiji. The speech was widely publicised. I spoke both in English as well as Hindi, to the surprise of some in the audience and the appreciation of others that, for the first time, a practising academic had addressed a gathering of what some saw as a communal party, that is, an Indo-Fijian party. From then on, our acquaintance deepened. Reddy would occasionally ask for notes for a speech he had in mind or a talk he had to

1 See my article 'The Fiji General Elections of 1982: The Tidal Wave That Never Came,' *Journal of Pacific History*, 18: 2 (1983), 134–57.

2 As he told the Sir John White Commission enquiring into the allegations made during the 1982 general elections.

3 B. Lal, *Power and Prejudice: The Making of the Fiji Crisis* (Wellington 1988); B. Lal, *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the 20th Century* (Honolulu 1992).

give, and I would oblige with that and other relevant material. By the time he nominated me to the Fiji Constitution Review Commission in March 1995 he was very well briefed on my scholarly work and about my stance on crucial issues – the 1987 coups, for example.⁴ Nonetheless, putting me on the commission was still a big gamble for him politically.

I continued to write about political developments in Fiji in the 1990s, along with the biography of the founding NFP leader, A.D. Patel, for whom Reddy had worked as a young lawyer from 1961 to 1966.⁵ Reddy was pleased with this work,⁶ but a study of his own life was never mentioned, nor did it occur to me to ask. After the completion of the constitution review work, I resumed my academic life in Canberra, returning to Fiji in 1999 to speak about the review work at some NFP rallies at Reddy's request, to the utter disappointment of his opponents in the Fiji Labour Party. The election was a rout for Reddy and his party. They failed to win a single seat in parliament. To everyone's surprise, Reddy fell to a novice. NFP stands for 'Not Fit for Parliament', opponents shouted. The results raised more questions than I could find answers for. Why such a massive defeat for a party which had played a crucial role in the review of the constitution? What caused the rejection by the Indo-Fijian electorate of a man widely seen as the dominant figure in the Indo-Fijian community and who was respected across the nation? It was then that I seriously contemplated writing Reddy's life as a prism into the history of post-independence Fiji. There was a certain logic to the project. In the Patel book I had taken the story of the Indo-Fijian political experience from the 1920s to the late 1960s; with this book the experience of the twentieth century would be complete.

Reddy was interested in the project in a detached kind of way, in the manner of an ever cautious lawyer. That is also in the nature of the man. Unlike most politicians, Reddy was reluctant to talk about himself; he was firmly focused on the present and on the future, and on trying to avoid the debilitating pitfalls of the past. But he promised to give me access to his and his party's papers, which were kept in massive cardboard boxes at his country house in Lautoka. The papers covered his life from the 1990s onwards; most of the papers dealing with the earlier period Reddy had burnt when he left parliament in December 1983, convinced that his political career in Fiji was over for good. I told Reddy

4 The 1988 book is titled *Power and Prejudice*. I deal with the work of the Commission in my 1998 *Another Way: The Politics of Constitutional Reform in Post-coup Fiji*, Asia Pacific Press, Canberra.

5 B. Lal, *A Vision for Change: AD Patel and the Politics of Fiji* (Canberra 1997); re-issued in 2011 by ANU E Press along with a collection of his speeches and writings.

6 As he said launching the book at the Sri Vivekananda College in Nadi: 'This exhaustively researched and well documented book is long overdue. We all owe a debt of gratitude to Dr Lal for his industry and perseverance in producing this excellent book.'

to his face that what he had done was a criminal act. He said nothing; there was nothing he could say. He had, though, kept some sensitive correspondence in a separate file which he gave me later. The papers, which are preserved for future researchers at the Pacific Research Archives at ANU, were a vital source for my research, containing correspondence with party people and other leaders, drafts of speeches, newspaper coverage of important events, policy documents, manifestos, campaign literature and other marginalia.⁷

These were supplemented with haphazardly organised material from the head office of the NFP in Tamavua, Suva. The building which housed the office was also the home of Kamal Iyer, a man with a phenomenal (and unforgiving) memory of recent political events. He had once worked in the Office of the Leader of the Opposition. He was effectively the custodian of the papers and gave me complete, unrestricted access to them. I do not know where these papers are now – probably lost to posterity. Mary Chapman, Secretary-General of the Fijian Parliament, was extremely helpful with insights about meetings which Reddy attended and the rapport between him and Rabuka; and generous in sharing, under supervision, closed records of committee meetings and other parliamentary proceedings not yet in the public domain.⁸ The staff at the Fiji Parliamentary Library let me have free rein with their mostly published records and a full set of the daily newspapers. These were also consulted, with less cooperation, at the Pacific Collection of the University of the South Pacific Library.

The lesson I learnt from my archival searches was, unsurprisingly, that the records about the contemporary period are sketchy and, furthermore, prey to the ravages of humidity and cockroaches. The National Archives of Fiji, chronically under-funded and under-staffed, is of very little help about the contemporary period. They simply cannot afford a systematic program of information gathering routinely undertaken in many other countries such as Australia. Private individuals often have fading or fractured memories of events of long ago, but no papers, and memories coloured in many cases by events of the intervening years. Newspapers help trace the contours of the past political landscape, but there is very little beyond the headline and the skimpy paragraph that follows. There are few people around to verify or amplify the accuracy of the reports, the situation aggravated by the migration of many past actors and party strategists. The past is now a foreign country to them and they are often reluctant to revisit it for fear of opening old wounds. Recordings of past campaign speeches by the Fiji Broadcasting Commission (now the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation) have all but vanished. All that any assiduous

7 The Pacific Manuscripts Bureau in Canberra has a microfilm of the papers.

8 They are at the National Archives of Fiji, accessible under the 30-year rule, I assume.

researcher can do is to assemble as much documentary material as he can, from whatever source he can access, and construct his narrative accordingly. He knows that his research is partial, but that is in the nature of the enterprise.⁹

The written, archival material would have to be supplemented by interviews I quickly realised. I began with colleagues I knew, who were willing to talk, who were sympathetic to my project, or were political allies of Jai Ram Reddy. Long-forgotten anecdotes were recalled around the *tanoa* bowl long into the night, along with quotable quotes from past fiery speeches, the machinations undermining an opponent, the trimming of truth (always by the other side, never your own), the internal jockeying for power. The essentially partial recollections were interesting, but they were partial; often they added much colour and variety but little substance. There were no great revelations. I asked for names of people on the other side of the political divide who might be willing to talk, not names of prominent leaders but others hidden in the shadows. This was easily given and I followed up the leads.

The picture I got from talking to them was often diametrically opposed to what I have heard before. For every event, there is an alternative explanation, casting Reddy in the role of a villain, a divider, a second-fiddle player. Some say that he was the right man in the wrong party. In many cases, the speakers preferred to remain anonymous; Fiji is a very small place and word gets around quickly. Their preference was respected. The interviews, if that is not too strong a word, were always informal, interspersed with frequent forays into irrelevance and trivia, but all this was part of the process, and things cannot be rushed. I did not carry a tape recorder with me, that stifles free-flowing conversation. A small notebook was all I had for recording dates and other precise information. Immediately afterwards, I wrote down the full text of our exchanges. I didn't have university ethical clearance routinely required for oral interviews these days; I was not unduly troubled. I belong to an earlier generation of researchers who did not need to be told to exercise prudence, judgement and fairness in their treatment of words spoken to them, to always place texts in context. I do not need to be told how to go about the business for which I was trained. Nevertheless, as a standard procedure, I checked back with my interviewees whenever I could about the accuracy of the quotes I attributed to them.

Reddy was aware that I was talking to people, but never once, on the rare occasion when we did meet, did we talk about my research. He was characteristically meticulous in the observance of the protocol of the law. That is his nature; but the arm's-length approach is also, I realised, a good thing to have. He can, in good conscience, disclaim any connection to the project if he does not like

⁹ The use of 'he' is not indicative of any gender bias on my part, but the constant use of 'he or she, his and hers' is tedious. My apologies.

what I have written. After all, it is my book, not his. By now, he knows me well enough to know that I would be fair-minded in my assessment of his life and work, which obviates the need for any discreet enquiry. If he could trust me to be his nominee on the Reeves Commission at one of the most critical moments in his political career, surely he could trust me with the biography project.

Having assembled the bulk of documentary material, I needed to have an informed conversation with Reddy about what I had read, about the gaps in what I had uncovered, and about what others had said. I was anxious. This was new territory for me. With the Patel book, I worked primarily with archival material, personal correspondence and a limited number of oral interviews. The man himself was long dead (in 1969) when I began research for the book (in the 1980s).

In 2004, I invited Reddy to Canberra (as part of the Distinguished Pacific Visitors Scheme) to talk at length about his life in politics. We sat in an empty office next to mine and talked over several days about the major political events in which he was a participant, his take on things, and his assessment of people. The conversation was recorded (now in digitised form for future researchers). Reddy speaks with clarity, candour and precision, in the manner of a persuasive barrister, never evading a hard question, always to the point. We talked about the major crises of the mid-1970s; about the NFP's failure to form government in April 1977; his statement over the radio about why the NFP could not govern on its own; and why Siddiq Koya was unable to become prime minister. We also talked about the enactment of the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act, which subsequently divided the party irreparably; we talked about the *Four Corners* programme and its role in the 1982 elections; we talked about the 1987 coups, its causes and consequences; and we traversed the tumultuous events of the 1990s, including the process that led to the formulation of the 1997 Constitution. This list was by no means exhaustive. I was grateful for the candour with which Reddy spoke. It certainly helped put hitherto misunderstood or misrepresented events into perspective.

I had enough new material from the interview to know that interpretations which have become part of the Fijian historical orthodoxy would no longer be viewed in the same way after the publication of my book. In popular mythology, Koya and Reddy are portrayed as sworn enemies, daggers drawn to the end. Reddy said he could never really dislike Koya, and Koya said that there was 'compassion' between the two men. Fijian nationalists targeted Reddy as a virulent anti-Fijian politician. Reddy, however, talked of warm relations with Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau ('an honourable adversary'), though not with Ratu Mara, between the two of whom there was mutual antagonism. He could 'talk for hours' with Fijian nationalist lawyers Kelemedi Bulewa and Etuate Tavai, and Apisai Tora, the founder of the fire-breathing Taukei Movement, would

give Reddy 'respect' – 'he would not shun me.' There was a revelation in the interviews on Reddy's relations with Sitiveni Rabuka. There was no bitterness or anger but a forgiving, understanding tone; a warm appreciation of Rabuka's openness and willingness to listen, and of his 'masterful' leadership of the constitutional review process. Perhaps the fact that Rabuka was a commoner, with no aristocratic pretensions and proclivities, made it easier for Reddy to deal with him, Reddy speculates with some justification.

Equally revealing for me was the discovery of how much of the reconciliation process of the 1990s – which led to the successful promulgation of the 1997 Constitution – was led by men outside the formal process, who facilitated dialogue and discussion away from the public eye, in informal get-togethers and dinners. Reddy especially mentioned the contributions of American Ambassador Don Givertz, House of Representatives Speaker Dr Apenisa Kurusiqila, and President of the Methodist Church Ilaita Tuwere. All this was new information, available nowhere else. The book is the richer for it. Reddy set the record straight about various allegations made against him by his opponents in the Fiji Labour Party: about his role in the enactment of the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act; about contentious issues in the sugar industry; about his role in the constitutional review process; and that he escaped Fiji at 'the height' of the 1987 coups. These clearly false allegations still hurt Reddy.

There was a certain sadness in the way Reddy recalled his political life to me; this most outstanding criminal lawyer of his generation who could have gone places in his beloved profession, his great love, but who reluctantly got drafted into politics at great personal cost. In one of my early conversations with him, I had asked how he would sum up his life. 'It is a wasted thirty years,' he said. 'I gave up thirty years of my life for nothing. All that sacrifice, for what?' It was an admission that had 'an arresting effect on me', says the biographer Doug Munro. 'It was such a sad thing to read: it really hit you in the face.'¹⁰ It evidently had a similar effect on another scholar, Jack Corbett, who made it the centrepiece of his review of the book,¹¹ and also on Professor Yash Ghai whose words conclude this chapter. Sometimes, in my darker moments, I have similar thoughts about having spent or rather misspent my entire professional life working on Fiji, its past and its present, only to bear witness to more pain and avoidable, unnecessary tragedy.

¹⁰ Correspondence from Doug Munro, 21 March 2013.

¹¹ See J. Corbett, 'In the Eye of the Storm: Jai Ram Reddy and the Politics of Postcolonial Fiji', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39: 2 (2011), 344–46.

I realised as I began writing that Reddy and I had not agreed to any precise condition about the use to which I would put the material, written and oral, he had provided me. At some point, whether I volunteered or Reddy requested (I cannot now say), he would read the final manuscript to point out any egregious errors of fact or interpretation, but that would be the extent of his intervention. The final say would be mine about what would go into the book and what would not. It was my account after all. Reddy was not concerned about the essential truth of what he told me; he was vaguely concerned about the impact of his comments about his adversaries on their families. Children should not pay for the sins of their fathers was his view. This very humane and entirely legitimate concern, I said, should be weighed against the concern for historical truth. Many wrong turns had been taken in the past, including by Reddy himself, but all this had to be confronted and, if possible, lessons drawn from them. We agreed to be mutually accommodating of each other's point of view. But there is nothing beyond that vague understanding. Reddy remarked several times, not entirely in jest I think, that I should publish the book after he was dead. Each time, I deflected his wish with a playful request for precise information about the date of his departure from this world!

By early 2007, the research was complete but the writing refused to get done. I got easily distracted, although, to be fair, there were many things happening in Fiji to distract one's attention, such as a military coup and the subsequent deluge from the media, both local and international, for commentary and assessment. That engagement still continues, much to my distress; I would like nothing more than for a return of more stable times in Fiji. But the claims of the past on my time and learning cannot be avoided. Constant movement between Suva (where my wife then lived and worked) and Canberra (my principal residence) did not help. Each day, the enormity of the writing task ahead drained me. I was probably suffering 'writer's block' and I began to entertain serious doubts as to whether I would ever be able to finish the project. I had a surreal sense of impending mortality, much to my wife's alarm, especially when I mentioned to her the person I would like to complete the book if I was gone. Nothing was going right for me until the day I was invited by an old student of mine to address his history class at a high school in Nasinu. His students, who had seen me on television, were keen to meet a 'real live' historian, he said. Could I say something about the value of reading and writing history to convince the non-believers that history was not necessarily for no-hopers. I spoke about what I was doing and asked the class of about 20 whether they knew who Jai Ram Reddy was. Not a single student knew, including the Indo-Fijians in the class, though they had heard of Sitiveni Rabuka and George Speight. This historical amnesia among Fiji's best and brightest horrified me.

Around the same time as my Nasinu talk, I came across an old issue of the *Fiji Times* lying about our Suva Point home. It contained a story about some Miss Hibiscus contestants visiting the Naboro Prison where they met its most infamous inmate, George Speight. One of them was quoted as saying: 'Meeting Mr Speight was like meeting Mr Mandela.' She gushed: 'He was really friendly and meeting him would be one of the biggest highlights of my life. This is a trip I would remember in years to come.' Another said that meeting Speight was 'like meeting one of the Hollywood celebrities', a memory she would 'cherish for the rest of my life'. Another contestant was reported to be 'in a world of her own when she visited Mr Speight and through all the trips they have taken, she described the prison visit as the most memorable'. I was speechless – what future for Fiji with role models like these? It was then that all my dithering and diversions disappeared and I began to write furiously, often six to eight hours a day. I had renewed determination that I would finish the book before it finished me. By May 2009, a year later, a good draft of a 230,000-word manuscript was completed.

People wondered politely about how the writing was going, but I quickly changed the subject. I don't like 'pissing in the wind', as Gavan Daws once said. Research and writing are for me solitary exercises, and I am wary of sharing my thoughts with others before they are fully formed. This, I imagine, is how most historians approach their task, unlike social scientists who are comfortable about working in teams and sharing ideas as they go along. As I was writing, I sometimes wondered about the reception the book would have in Fiji. It was a depressing thought. I was under no illusion that my book was going to be read in Fiji. People in Fiji just don't read, even, or especially, those who make their living from teaching in tertiary institutions. There would be no review forums, no university seminars beyond comments about my industry and perseverance – not even criticism that I was interfering from afar in matters that no longer concerned me.

My worst fears turned out to be well founded. Nearly five years after its publication, not a single review has appeared in Fiji. No one has written to me even privately to express their views, critical or otherwise, about the book. It is as if the book did not exist. So why do I write? I certainly do not write for a non-existent Fiji readership. In a sense, they do not matter anymore. I write because I have to, to bear witness to the time in which I have lived. I see writing as an act of revenge against a culture of indifference and forgetfulness, an act of revenge against historical amnesia. Words, as Winston Churchill once said, are the only things that last forever. And historians, if they are to be true to their vocation as guardians of public memory, must find a place at the table of posterity for both victors as well as the vanquished.

Writing history – writing anything – does not come easily to me. Writing the history of the present is especially fraught. Contemporary history, some would say, is an oxymoron, like family vacation or friendly fire. You write as the gun is still smoking. You have no sense of how things will turn out in the future. Other accounts will come to light, fresh evidence unearthed that might throw a different light on the period or contradict your account.¹² I am not unduly troubled by this. There can be no question of finality in historical discourse. History, as someone has said, is a long conversation without an end. We all live within our own histories, not outside or beyond them. Timeless historical texts, – for example, by Gibbon or Macaulay or Trevelyan, or Thomas Carlyle on the French Revolution – are as rare as the clichéd hen's teeth; and they are enjoyed today more for their style and craftsmanship than for their historical content.¹³ Then there is the forbidding thought that the person you are writing about is alive and will read what you have written. And not just him alone, but his numerous colleagues and friends (as well as foes) who were part of the action you describe and who will each have their own personal recollections, their own take on events, which they will not hesitate to communicate to you in no uncertain terms. I can't say – what writer can – that I have got everything absolutely right, but if the broad picture I have painted is seen as credible and authentic, I should be pleased.

As promised, I sent the completed manuscript to Reddy for his perusal. Several weeks passed and I didn't hear from him. I was worried enough to ring him. He was complimentary about the depth of my research – he had forgotten about half the events and episodes narrated in the book – but there was a hint of hesitation in his voice. 'I am not sure this should be published,' he said in a tone that I found deeply worrying. 'There are too many things here that will unnecessarily upset too many people. I have finished my career and I want to be left alone in peace.' He continued:

This book will bring back memories of old controversies better left buried. What is done is done. Why unnecessarily hurt children of my former political opponents? I am not sure I want my grandchildren to read all this one day.

I was disappointed, to say the least, to be told that after all the years of research, the book should not be published. In response, I raised the historian's traditional defence. 'The past cannot be erased, no matter how much we may wish it to go away,' I told him. 'If I don't write, someone else will; you are a figure of history

12 See D. Munro, *The Ivory Tower and Beyond* (Newcastle upon Tyne 2009), 273–80.

13 See J. Clive, 'Why Read the Great Nineteenth Century Historians,' in J. Clive, *Not By Fact Alone* (Boston 1989) 34–47.

and will be judged accordingly; you have an obligation to allow your story to be told.' I went on like this for a while, but I was not sure Reddy was listening. I was not sure I had convinced him to see my point of view.

In a curious kind of way, I understand Reddy's reaction. He has firmly shut the door on his political past and has moved on to retirement after several years as a Permanent Judge on the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. But I was not about to give up. 'You have encountered some of the biographer's worse nightmares,' a colleague sympathises. There are several, he says:

They include serious disapproval from Guardians of the Great Spirit, who don't want you going anywhere near their esteemed and departed friend. There is denial of access to sources. Then there is a previously cooperative 'living' subject spitting the dummy. What started as a cuddly relationship turns sour when they see what you've said.

As a make-or-break initiative, I invited Reddy to Canberra for a face-to-face conversation so that I could get a better understanding of his objections. If the manuscript had to be junked ... the thought remains unfinished. Over several days, we went through the whole manuscript, page by page, chapter by chapter. We agreed in advance that Reddy would have no say over my use of material gathered independently from other sources (such as newspaper reports), but only over that which came directly from him orally. That is the only veto power he would have. It is a fair compromise; it is always possible to get things wrong or distorted when dealing with oral evidence. Things said in the heat of the moment can be reconsidered. Perhaps things were said in confidence and not intended for public dissemination. I approached the encounter with much trepidation. But I was relieved that contrary to my deepest apprehension, Reddy did not find any egregious fault with my overall interpretation. A face-to-face meeting made all the difference, with the opportunity for a prolonged conversation, digressions, breaks over cups of coffee and lunches. There was give and take. I accepted that I might have misunderstood Reddy's intentions, which might have caused me to react too strongly.

The meeting went well. There was no difference over substance, or very little, but difference only over style. Reddy did not deny the quotes I attributed to him. He was concerned primarily about how they might come across, or how they might give inadvertent offence. As a scrupulous lawyer, he was especially concerned about protecting the privacy of confidential information. Why revisit the darkest period of his party's and his community's life with a blow-by-blow account? What purpose would that serve except to give comfort to his detractors? He suggested a way out. Could I say the same thing indirectly, allusively, without altering the substance of the text? I had no problems with

that at all; in a way, I found Reddy's concern about the discomfort his words might cause to his erstwhile foes admirable. That speaks volumes for the kind of man Reddy is and why he is so widely admired by those who remember him.

I respected Reddy's concerns and readily amended words and phrases and direct attribution that might have given offence. I am now glad that he had an opportunity to read the final manuscript with great care. After all, I had written a book about him. But as readers will see when they compare the final published version with the penultimate draft of the manuscript (preserved for future researchers), there is not an iota of difference, none, in interpretation between the two versions. It is easy to be wise after the fact. In the book, I quote Theodore Roosevelt in support of the principle of authorial humility: 'It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.'¹⁴ The credit, he continues,

belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, who spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly.

There should be room for criticism and evaluation, as good scholarship demands, but 'it should always be tempered by a sensitive appreciation of context, contingency and circumstance'.

To that end, I appended at the end of each chapter one or two of Reddy's speeches on topics covered in it. This, I hoped, would enable readers to weigh Reddy's words and judgements against my interpretation of them. Their inclusion made the book bulkier, but several readers wrote to express their thanks for the archival value the speeches added to the book, especially as most of the speeches were not in the public domain, and some were lost forever. I will give an example. One of the most controversial topics in post-independence Fiji was a proposal floated by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara for a government of national unity. He later claimed that Reddy had rejected the proposal, and that claim has become a part of the myth about Reddy's recalcitrance. I assessed this and other contentions in the book, but included two papers on the subject. One is the original paper written by Alliance politician Ahmed Ali outlining the problem and proposing solutions. Reddy subjected the paper to a clinical analysis at the NFP's Ba Convention in 1980; the paper is reprinted in the book. Reading the two papers together gives the reader a good sense of the complexity of the

14 B. Lal, *In the Eye of the Storm: Jai Ram Reddy and the Politics of Postcolonial Fiji* (Canberra 2010), xviii.

subject and the political calculations which sounded it. No serious discussion of the government of national unity proposal would ever be complete without reference to Reddy's reply.

I acknowledge the danger of forming conclusions about the past through the eyes of one individual.

It is far too tempting, in this approach, to impute too much importance and impact to the actions and thoughts of one person when, as is often the case, the person actually represents the consensus of a larger group of which he was merely a spokesman.

The approach, I continued, 'could also potentially frustrate an understanding of the deeper forces of change over time that transcends the range of personal experience.' All that conceded, I agreed,

but it is still true that some men and women do achieve a level of eminence and practical authority in the affairs of their societies and are able, by force of personality and personal intervention, charisma and cunning, to mould events to suit their purposes and thus affect the course of history.¹⁵

Jai Ram Reddy was such an Indo-Fijian leader, just as A.D. Patel had been the charismatic leader in pre-independence Fiji. But seeing the past through Reddy's eyes and experience also alerted me to patterns and changes which would otherwise have eluded me. I saw, for example, how and why in the 1980s and 1990s the NFP moved away from its demand for common roll to consociationalism. I saw close range the deep fractures and fissures in the Indo-Fijian community which acquired a political dimension in the 1990s, the North Indian–South Indian divide, for example. I saw how false it was to see the political process in Fiji solely through the prism of race, just as it was false to see the Indo-Fijian community as homogenous in its intentions and motives.

Most readers will likely see *In the Eye of the Storm* as an exercise in biographical writing. It is that, to be sure, but it is also something different. Reddy is the centrepiece of the book, and there is a long treatment of his childhood, his cultural and social background, and his early education and upbringing. But there is no deep probing of his interior life, no psychological analysis. I am candid with the readers. The book is not a biography in the conventional sense of the word. Rather, it is more in the nature of a political history of the subject.¹⁶

15 Ibid., xv.

16 Ibid., xiv.

The focus is not on Reddy the man and his interior life or his private emotional world. Such an approach would require an intimacy with the subject I do not possess. Moreover, that kind of project is beyond my competence or even inclination to pursue. The Oedipus complex and all that are not for me. I accept for the purpose of this project that the public self is the 'real' self. Hence the focus on Jai Ram Reddy's public life and his engagement with the dominant political issues and concerns of his time shaped by the master narratives of colonialism and postcolonialism.¹⁷

Every writer of the life of a major contemporary figure, especially of his own community and country, will invariably face the question of how objective he is in his assessment of the subject. It is a fair question, but my firm view is that the writer must have a sympathetic understanding of the subject: the choices the writer made, the context in which he operated, and the constraints he experienced. It is very easy to shoot fish in a fish bowl. I am upfront with my readers:

I am in broad sympathy with Jai Ram Reddy's political philosophy and approach to politics in Fiji and the fundamental transformation he sought to bring about in its political culture and orientation. The essential course that Reddy attempted to chart for his people and his vision for their place in the larger scheme of things were intrinsically right.¹⁸

And there was a personal dimension too. I was in my early university years when Reddy entered politics in the early 1970s. I witnessed at first hand the unfolding drama in which Reddy had a leading part. I was an interested bystander for most of the time, a student of it too and, for a brief period, a minor participant in the story I was narrating. In a very real sense, Reddy's story was my story too. 'Reddy's story is inevitably refracted through the lens of my own personal experience and political perspective.' At least some readers have appreciated this candid declaration of reflexivity on my part.

All scholarship is paradoxically both a solitary and a collective endeavour. You have got to face the tyranny of the blank screen all on your own, but you realise that you have reached that stage through the sacrifice and support of many people. I have had the good fortune of having friends and colleagues who have put aside their own work to read mine, to correct my prose and my stylistic blemishes, to seek clarification of points blindingly obvious to me but obscure to others. On the basis of friendship and regard we ask others to comment on our work, knowing that they will be honest and frank, to the point of asking

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., xvi.

hard questions and coming out with hard criticisms. Things can be said in this context that go down very badly if coming from others. Having close and caring readers of your work in its formative stages is an invaluable asset; it lightens the burden and alerts you to new, unseen possibilities. But it is an asset in diminishing supply as the pressures and perils of academic life increase in these days of bureaucratic accounting.

In the Eye of the Storm has been well received, even in quarters where I expected hostility. But, as noted above, in Fiji there has been deafening silence. There is no reading culture there anymore. It is intellectually and morally an arid place, empty, the creative spirit and quest for fearless investigation corroded by two decades of coup-inspired turbulence. A conforming intellectual culture subservient to the regime in power, looking the other way as human rights violations proliferate, is rapidly becoming the order of the day. People who might have once been looked up to for leadership – intellectual and moral (vice chancellors, scholars, religious leaders) – have, many of them, offered their services to the military regime in return for minor rewards and recognition in their twilight years, but all the while camouflaging their personal pecuniary and business interests with the rhetoric of altruistic service and sacrifice. 'Menopausal males,' someone has called the do-gooders from overseas, former Fiji citizens, returning to offer their services for hefty fees and other forms of recognition. I have lost all hope of scholarship informing public discourse in Fiji any time soon, of effecting a change in attitude, of underpinning public policy. Colonels and commodores, not artists, scholars and thinkers, are paraded as role models for the younger generation.

So why do I write? In addition to what I have said before, because writing matters, because preserving memories from the ravages of time and human vanity matters, and because I want to leave my imprint upon my time and place. At my age and stage, and in contrast to younger scholars, I can ignore university demands to publish in highly ranked journals and the like; the 'brownie points system' of today simply washes over me.

All that and more; writing *In the Eye of the Storm* was also a cathartic experience for me. I relived the tumultuous events of the post-independence years that I had witnessed as a bystander: the pettiness of political leaders, corrupt and self-serving; the rampant racism; the arrogance of power; the coups and chaos; the fractured hopes and betrayal of promises; and the struggle of one man, not perfect by any means, hobbled by bitter divisions among his own people and facing the wrath of men convinced of their God-given right to rule irrespective of the verdict of the ballot box; the struggle by one man to find an honourable middle course for his people and for his country. All that sacrifice, all that anguish and heartache, came to nought in the end. To relive all this was a deeply painful experience for Reddy, as it was for me. I know in my heart that

I would not be able to write this book now; 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. I am reminded of the words of William Butler Yeats: 'Time drops in decay/ Like a candle burnt out'.

I conclude with the words of Professor Yash Ghai, the distinguished constitutional lawyer who has himself played a part in Fiji's recent history:

The book ends, at least as it strikes me, both on the note of the achievement of a great man and sadness. There is sadness at Reddy's own assessment of his life in politics, living in 'exile' and caring at a distance for the welfare of Fiji. And sadness about the Indo-Fijian community (despite its resilience): rejection in its land of adoption despite humiliation and exploitation it suffered there: the inhumanity of the indenture system, 'denial of the humanity of the individual man and woman, the wilful negation of their cultural identity by those in authority.' Now dispersed again, a second migration, bonds of family weakened, foreshadowing the disappearance of the Indo-Fijian, the end of a chapter, end of a phase of history.¹⁹

19 Y. Ghai, 'In the Eye of the Storm: Jai Ram Reddy and the Politics of Postcolonial Fiji. By Brij V. Lal', in *The Journal of Pacific History*, 46: 3 (2011), 400.

This text is taken from *Political Life Writing in the Pacific: Reflections on Practice*, edited by Jack Corbett and Brij V. Lal, published 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.