

Brij Vikash Lal: Bearing Witness to Fiji's Jagged History
A Review of *Bearing Witness: Essays in Honour of Brij*
V. Lal (by Doug Munro & Jack Corbett (eds), 2017,
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Sanjay Ramesh

It is very hard to write a book review of an accomplished academic, and distinguished professor, Brij Vikash Lal, who single handedly developed historiography on Fiji's indenture to a scale unrivalled by any Indo-Fijian historian or political scientist.

Lal, under the academic guidance of Ken Gillion, documented the trials and tribulations of indentured labourers of Fiji, who lived in horrible living conditions and on pay that was considerably less than what was promised by the colonial recruiters. More important perhaps were the social conditions in Fiji where the colonial administration constructed small and unlivable barracks, forcing many to suicide, self-harm and social turmoil unprecedented in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Fiji. Indian indentured labourers were taken from India to mostly British colonies in Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname, Fiji and South Africa where they were subjected to harsh and inhuman conditions and laws which allowed British planters maximum profits by keeping labour costs down. The regime established by the British colonialism ensured three things: iron control of the plantation life, ongoing supply of cheap Indian labour (1835 to 1920) and lack of sanitation, hygiene and health care. The system that indentured labourers became part of was referred to as plantation capitalism,

Bearing Witness is a study of Professor Brij Lal, who devoted his whole career to the study of historical forces in Fiji. These forces were at times perplexing because Fiji remains an ethnically divided nation, even though there are political forces that claim inclusion, common identity and fair constitution. The story of Fiji from the perspective of Professor Lal provides the reader with a sense of purpose for reflection and debate that are often missing from mainstream political discourse in Fiji.

The first part of the book is a series of questions and answers that seek to embed Lal's thinking within Fiji's historical context. Doug Munro, a seasoned Pacific historian and Jack Corbett edited the volume that has contributions from well know writers on Fiji including Robert Norton, Martha Kaplan, John Kelly, Yash Ghai, Stewart Firth and others. However, missing from this list are local Fijian academics, who could have provided indigenous and Indo-Fijian perspectives on Brij Lal's achievements.

Lal was born in Labasa in Vanua Levu and through hard work graduated from the University of the South Pacific and went for further studies to Canada where he completed his Master degree. Afterwards, Lal found his way to University of Hawaii and then to Australian National University where he undertook ground breaking research on indentured labourers in Fiji. Lal is considered to be a 'revisionist' historian (2017: 15) who used emigration data to highlight migration of indentured labourers to Fiji from various Indian districts and showed various male to female imbalances that elevated social problems on the plantations. Not only highlighting data tables, Lal backed his analysis through a powerful historical narrative on exile, poverty, and struggles for dignity and self respect that many uprooted people face globally. We get an insight into the work of Lal's most admired character, A.D. Patel, which we learn was an English empiricist who admired and revered the work of Edmund Burke and Indian nationalist writers. A.D. Patel was a controversial figure in Fiji because he was not an indentured labourer but came to the country as a free migrant who became politically active due to his legal training, organising cane strikes in the 1940s and the 1960s. Despite differences in opinion on A.D. Patel, there is a consensus that he was responsible for forcing the issue of independence on indigenous Fijians and the colonial government in Fiji.

In the question and answer session with Vilisoni Hereniko, Lal laments about the Rabuka-Reddy coalition of 1999 that ended with the rout of the Soqosoqo ni Vakevulewa ni Taukei, the National Federation and the General Voters Party in the 1999 general election. In this election, the people of Fiji overwhelmingly voted for the Fiji Labour Party which formed a coalition with the Fijian Association Party, and the western regional party, the Party of National Unity, led by maverick politician Apisai Tora; after elections it included the Christian Democratic Alliance into the Coalition. Mahendra Chaudhry became the first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister with two deputy indigenous Fijian, Adi Kuini Speed and Tupeni Baba. The election of the Fiji Labour Party was made possible by the 1997 Constitution which are arrived at after two years of intense ne-

negotiations among various political of Fiji. The baseline for these negotiations was the Reeves Commission Report in 1996 which consisted of three highly qualified and respected commissioners including Brij Lal, Sir Paul Reeves and Tomasi Vakatora. Lal notes that the problem with Fiji at the time of the constitution review was 'provincialism' (2017:35) but elaborates that the '1997 Constitution was widely approved after thorough consultation, blessed by the Great Council of Chiefs and approved unanimously by the parliament'. So 'what went wrong?'

On hindsight, there are three things that went wrong. Political parties in keeping with their provincial and ethnic loyalties chose to reverse the recommendations of the Reeves Commission by changing the number of communal seats from the recommended 25 to 45 to appease the ethnonationalists. The Senate that was recommended to be elected via electoral college was ignored and again to appease the wishes of the ethnic social forces, the Great Council of Chiefs continued to play a dominant role with appointments of Senators. In such a scenario, multi-party cabinet was advocated and adopted but not feasible or pragmatic due to the preponderance of ethnic considerations in the 1997 Constitution. To make matters worse, the government introduced Alternative Vote, a preferential voting system used in the election of Australian Senators and in general elections in Nauru. Fiji had no experience with preferential voting, and preference swapping; party preference strategies hugely disadvantaged the Rabuka-Reddy coalition.

It is clear that Lal is a proponent of the 1997 Constitution but this constitution was abrogated by the military in 2009 after the Fiji Court of Appeal declared the 2006 coup 'illegal'. At the time, Brij Lal and his wife Padma were in Fiji. Soon after they were detained, deported and put on a immigration 'black list'. While responding to questions from Jack Corbett, Lal identifies his ordeal as 'hurtful': 'its hurting because as the oldest living family member of my extended family, I have certain responsibilities and obligations which I cannot fulfill' (2017: 49). Professor Vijay Naidu while giving a keynote address at the end of indenture conference at the University of Fiji in March 2017 remarked that the pioneer of indenture studies in Fiji, Professor Brij Lal, could not attend this special occasion due to a travel ban introduced by the Fiji government.

In further expressing his hurt, Lal argues that despite the achievements of the Bainimarama government, there still remains an undeniable fact that 'violence is used as an instrument of public policy' (2017: 50). This is an interesting observation since opposition private members bill are never given any consideration and restrictive conventions especially on opposition members are imposed via standing orders. In addition, the

parliamentary committees which are supposed to be 'consensus-making' forums are stacked in favour of the government. It is extremely difficult to argue that the current committee structures are deliberative and allow for 'consensus' regime when in fact, the parliament continues to be partisan and confrontational.

Moving on from the question and answers, there are analysis from Goolam Vahed who locates Lal's work in historical imaginary and Clem Seecharan who placed indenture in the larger indenture diaspora studies of Guyana. Robert Norton talks about the decolonisation decade (2017: 130) of the 1960s which was nothing short of 'decolonisation debacle', where Indo-Fijian leaders without any meaningful understanding of indigenous Fijian culture, language and history pushed needlessly for independence. Ayodhya Prasad, a fierce critic of Patel, argued that there should be clear and present demarcation of those who came during indenture and their siblings and those who came as free migrants. These issues were debated at length during the 1990s as tensions between the National Federation Party and the Fiji Labour Party reached fever pitch. Nevertheless, Norton makes important observations on the strategies adopted by the Alliance Party and the National Federation Party prior to independence but as Lal noted, at independence, a 'time bomb' was waiting to explode and it did in 1977 and again in 1987, creating trajectories for further coups in 2000 and 2006.

Other writers, including Martha Kaplan and John Kelly (2017: 153-176) retrace familiar territories and comment extensively on the work of Lal especially in the 1980s when Lal wrote numerous high impact articles in the *Journal of Pacific History*. Kaplan and Kelly conclude that 'Fiji has repeatedly lost democracy, and paid a further price, in generations of out-migration of many of its most talented people from every group, especially the Indians' (2017: 172). Once a majority, Indo-Fijians are now approximately 35 per cent of the population; it is projected that their population will reduce further and indigenous Fijian population will increase. In such a scenario, political rights of Indo-Fijians become very crucial.

Yash Ghai, who led the 2012 constitution review process, notes that 'the draft constitution was to meet the needs of Fiji and the aspirations of its people, unite those people, be "appropriately designed" to achieve "true democracy, and respect for, and protection and promotion of human rights" (s. 3(d)). Another provision listed certain "non-negotiable principles and values": (i) a common and equal citizenry; (ii) a secular state; (iii) the removal of systemic corruption; (iv) an independent judiciary; (v) elimination of discrimination; (vi) good and transparent governance; (vii) social justice; (viii) one person, one vote, one value; (ix) the elimina-

tion of ethnic voting; (x) proportional representation; and (xi) voting age of 18 years (s. 3(e))' (2017: 196). However, the aspirations of the Ghai Commission were expunged and those in authority imposed their own version of the draft constitution which became the 2013 Constitution. In conclusion Ghai argues that the 2012 draft constitution was aimed at fulfilling the aspirations of the Reeves 1996 recommendations, with 'a fundamental restructuring of institutions' (2017: 203). Brij Lal would undoubtedly have supported the Ghai recommendations of 2012 but this was not to happen due to other political considerations such as the regime's opposition to a constituent assembly consisting of union and NGO representatives.

Besides Kaplan, Kelly and Ghai, Stewart Firth addresses the issue of rights and representation in Fiji. However these conceptions of rights are based on ethnic imaginations emanating out of ideas, institutions and culture. For long the indigenous political paramountcy was the accepted ideology and became an orthodoxy in post-independent Fiji. All political discourse had to confirm to this and deviation was quickly labelled as 'anti-Fijian', 'anti-chief' and 'anti-vanua'. Institutions such as the Fijian Affairs Board and the Native Land Trust Board were geared towards positive discrimination and providing support to indigenous Fijians and the state, *the matanitu*, was the meeting ground of the Taukei elite. Brij Lal noted the tensions between the aspirations of the Indo-Fijian leaders and indigenous Fijian elite and these tensions were played out in 1977, 1982, 1987, 1992, 1994, 1999, 2001, 2006 elections. Jai Ram Reddy attempted to diffuse these tensions by forging an alliance with Rabuka but neither were successful, leading to even greater political destabilisation in 2000.

Brij Lal not only has written on Fiji's political history but he has written various forms of narratives and poetry that capture his emotions and feelings of his childhood country. The final chapter is a bibliography of Brij's published work compiled by historian Doug Munro. It tells a story of publications that span over 40 years (1977-2017).

This book is celebration of the work of Brij Lal and some of the controversies that I have highlighted will not be resolved any time soon. Brij Lal has made enormous contributions to Fiji's history and to the history of indenture.

Reviewer:

Sanjay Ramesh, is Honorary Lecturer, Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Sydney. Email: sanjay.ramesh@sydney.edu.au