A girmitiya’s grandson

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ABSTRACT
Brij Vilash Lal was an Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University and Honorary Professor at the University of Queensland. He taught History at the ANU, the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the University of the South Pacific and the University of Papua New Guinea. He was a Life Member of Clare Gall, University of Cambridge. He was the author of more than twenty books and editor of another twenty on the history and culture of the Indian diaspora and on the history and politics of Fiji. He died on 25 December 2021.

KEYWORDS
Brij Vilash Lal, indentureship, Indian diaspora, Fiji, history, politics

On 18 February 1908, a 26-year-old man boarded SS Sangola II for Fiji. He had been recruited for Demerara (Guyana), he told us, but that
ship was full, so he was put on the next one – to Fiji. He arrived in Fiji a month later, on an Agreement (Girmit) to work as an indentured labourer on sugar plantations there. When his inden-
ture expired five years later, he decided to remain in Fiji. Foreboding about reception back home after he had broken the rules of custom and tradition of his people about food, caste and travel, and the hope of freedom and opportunity his new home offered, kept him back. And so, an intended sojourn was transformed into permanent dis-
placement. That young man was my Aja, paternal grandfather. My Aji was a girmitiya, too, but her story is lost to us. All I remember of her is her short stature; five foot nothing, fair skin, deeply furrowed face with a perpetual frown, slowly losing her mind.

Aja and Aji had two sons, the older of whom was my father, Pitaji. Both Pitaji and Ma were children of girmitiyas, unlettered and living on a leased plot of land, growing cane and other subsis-
tence crops for the family. Like other folks in the rolling cane country without electricity, running water or paved roads, they lived at the outer edge of poverty, making do with whatever they had. That was the lot of their generation. From the fragments of a remembered past, they built communities, temples, mosques, schools, and fashioned a rhythm that gave structure and coher-
ence to their fractured lives and ours. I remain grateful for that grounding. What was home once, intimate, and real, is now a lab-
yrinth of vanishing memories.

EDUCATION

We came on the scene in the post-war years. By then, the world was changing rapidly. Radio had just arrived and Hindi newspapers, too. Primary schools were being put on a firmer footing beyond their rudimentary thatched structures with the expectation that most children would complete at least some part of their elementary schooling. We began with the Caribbean Readers with Mr Joe and his hilarious cast of unruly animals (Mr Grumps, the Goat, Master
Willy, the Pig, Miss Tibbs, the Cat). Their antics have remained with me through the years. Then we moved on to the *Oxford African Series* with stories about our ‘cousins’ in that distant continent. We were a part of the British Empire which gave us all the good things in life for which we were supposed to be forever grateful. We sang ‘God Save the Queen’, our Queen, every Friday morning with innocent enthusiasm. We also studied Hindi in the Devanagari script although my earlier fluency in the language is now shaky.

By the 1960s, secondary education was no longer a rarity in Fiji. We were the last generation of high school students to study the colonial curriculum. We sat the Fiji Junior, New Zealand Certificate and NZ University Entrance exam. There was a much-dreaded external exam at each step of the way; failure in any of them meant the end of the road for us. We had no sense of entitlement, no second chance. So many of my village friends fell by the wayside whom I never saw again. A few years before us, school children sat the empire-wide Cambridge Junior and Senior Secondary exams on subjects even more remote (the Stuarts and Tudors, the Enclosure Movement, Magna Carta).

At high school, we studied such subjects as the Causes of the First World War, The Russian Revolution, Europe between the Treaty of Versailles and the Treaty of Vienna, the Rise of Fascism in Italy and Germany, the Unification of Germany and Italy. There was nothing about Fijian or Pacific history in the curriculum as if all that did not matter and was not considered worthy of being taught. It was the same in all the colonies. In our English literature classes, we read the novels of the Bronte sisters, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, Lawrence Durrell, John Steinbeck, the plays of Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw and the poems of T.S. Eliot and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. ‘Water, water everywhere, nor a drop to drink’, ‘I grow old, I grow old, I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled’.

This unabashedly Eurocentric curriculum is today seen as a part of the ‘colonizing project’ of the imperialists. That they might have
been, but we had nothing in our own village background, no tradition of reading and writing of any kind. These texts opened new horizons for us, connected us to other pasts and places, emphasized our common humanity albeit in an unequal relationship. The novelists and poets explored the vagaries of the human condition that transcended the boundaries of race and region. From them I picked up an abiding curiosity about the world that has remained with me. So, too, has the love of words, their power and reach. Reading for pleasure has been my lifelong passion. ‘Words are the only thing that last forever’, Churchill once observed, though now the internet is challenging that hegemonic status.

It was at university that I was introduced, or rather introduced myself, to our own history and environment. It was there that I came across the books of K.L. Gillion (*Fiji's Indian Migrants*) and Adrian Mayer (*Peasants in the Pacific*). They made our past come alive, become real, page after crisp page. Through them, I discovered other books on ‘overseas Indian communities’ as they were called then. The word ‘Diaspora’ came much later: works by Hilda Kuper (Natal), Burton Benedict (Mauritius), Morton Klass, and Arthur and Juanita Niehoff (Trinidad), Chandra Jayawardena (Guyana) and Gerald Spackman (Suriname). This was a serendipitous discovery. In an undefinable way, I became aware of a kindred community scattered across the globe. That knowledge lessened our sense of isolation and loneliness. The photographs I saw in the books could easily have been photographs of our own cousins and uncles from the village. The puja ceremonies, the festivals they celebrated (*Phagwa, Diwali, Eid, Muharram*) were our festivals, too. I did not know it then that I would spend a large part of my life exploring the culture and history of the Indian diaspora.

The university was important in other ways too. The University of the South Pacific was a regional university belonging to small island states of the South Pacific. It was at the Suva campus that we first met students from other parts of the region as well as from other parts of Fiji. And it was the first time we encountered indigenous Fijian
students. Gradually, gingerly, we explored each other’s fears and aspirations, tiptoeing around sensitive topics. At university, too, we began to talk about national politics. Fiji had become independent in 1970, and we vaguely felt we would have a role to play in its future. Imbued with bookish idealism and fashionable student radicalism derived from overseas, we debated the nature of development and progress best suited to the needs of ‘our people’, about the neocolonialism of our neighbours Australia and New Zealand, about French nuclear testing in the Pacific. Heady stuff, all this.

Broadening intellectual interests apart, many of us also met our future partners at the university. That is where I met Padma, a scientist, and we have been together for almost fifty years. It is culturally not fashionable to talk about one’s spouse, but it is equally true that we very often take their invisible contribution to all we do for granted. A sentence of gratitude in acknowledgements in books and monographs is often all the mention they get. Padma has been my constant companion for all these decades without whom I cannot imagine the journey I have taken.

**RESEARCH**

I went to university on a government scholarship to train as a high school history teacher. My good performance in classes came to the attention of my lecturers who encouraged me to think of an academic career. A far-fetched dream it seemed then, but that has been my lifelong career. My journey towards that goal began at The Australian National University in 1977 when I went there to do my doctoral research. It seems natural and entirely reasonable in hindsight that I would choose for my dissertation topic the history of my own people.

As a child, I used to see a few girmitiyas, then in their twilight years, hard of sight and hearing, coming home to reminisce with Aja. They looked strange men to me in dress and mannerisms, wearing Indian *kurta, dhoti* and *pagri*, all sporting a week-long
beard growth and speaking a language we did not understand. They looked like a people stranded, physically living in Fiji but in fact in their minds and hearts living in the village India of their childhood, a land full of romance and adventure now refracted through the lens of men ending their lives far away from home. No one really asked them about their experience. For their children girmit was associated with darkness and degradation, an experience best left to the forgotten pages of history. Our folks had made something of themselves and did not want to be reminded of the people’s long and sorrowful journey. And there were pressing tasks at hand to address, to get on with the business of living. When we wanted to know, it was too late.

My curiosity about the girmitiyas grew. I wanted to know who these people were, why and how they had come to Fiji, how they had survived. In popular accounts they were portrayed as the flotsam and jetsam of humanity, ‘sweepings of the streets of Calcutta and Madras’, who had fallen into the net of rapacious recruiters or otherwise fraudulently recruited to migrate. Even in sympathetic accounts they were always portrayed as victims, with no humanity or agency of their own. That portrayal did not resonate with what little I knew of the girmitiyas like my grandfather and his compatriots. They had endured great hardship and even brutality, but were not broken or embittered by it. After their girmit expired, they started all over again and built a new life for themselves and established communities across the sugar belt of Fiji. This spoke to a life of tenacity, resilience and courage.

For my dissertation, I examined the social and economic background of Fiji’s North Indian migrants between 1879 and 1920 based on a massive, computerized analysis of 45,000 Emigration Passes. An eyesight-straining ordeal, I can assure you. The data showed that indentured emigrants came from a representative social and economic cross-section of rural North Indian society, not only or predominantly from the lowest strata. A large number were recruited up-country for indenture in the colonies but were rejected
as unfit for sustained labour. The eastern districts of the United Provinces from where most of the migrants came were caught in the grips of deepening poverty, indebtedness, land fragmentation and general depression. Emigration was fast becoming a strategy to cope with the adversities of life. In fact, officials concluded, for many districts, it was the lifeline to survival. Migration to the colonies became an extension of the massive wave of internal migration already underway. The sweet tongue of the unscrupulous recruiters sealed the deal, but it was not the primary cause of migration.

My year in India passed quickly and uneventfully. By the end of my time there, I had begun to look beyond the grim humdrum of daily life. My Hindi had improved, I could talk to folks in their own language fluently, I could eat roadside dhaba food without catching the stomach bugs, and I had made good friends who shared my love of Hindi movies and Indian music of a certain vintage (which can still move me to tears, touch places in my heart). But India was not my country. I valued my individuality and privacy more than I had realized before. I was an island boy with a salty ocean in my blood.

With research on the Indian background of the indentured labourers complete, I turned to the experience of indenture in Fiji. Much of this work was done while I was teaching at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu. Three themes dominated my work of that period: women and work, gender and sexual violence on plantations, and resistance and accommodation among the labourers. The picture that emerged suggested a much more complex narrative, multi-layered, and not as simple as the ‘indenture-as-slavery’ paradigm presented by Hugh Tinker suggested. Indenture was a life sentence in some places but it was also a limited detention in other cases. Along with the fragmentation of the institutions and practices of the old world – the caste and joint family system, the rituals and ceremonies of village India which could not survive the crossing and the rigorous demands of plantation work – there also took place the process of reconstitution of fragments of memory filtered through a
remembered past. But the slavery thesis holds a powerful emotional appeal; it forms an integral part of the ideology of grief and grievance which animates public discourse.

I moved away gradually from the early history of migration and indenture to the post-indenture period, to the gradual evolution of a new society emerging from the debris of indenture, how new associations emerged as people sought to create a new identity for themselves in the new land. Easier said than done, for once indenture ended, Indians ceased to be of interest to the government unless they engaged in some infraction of the law. There are no documents, no archived memory. That memory is preserved in the failing memories of a passing generation. This is the question that confronted me when I began to look deeper into our roots in Fiji: how community organizations were built and sustained, how disputes were resolved, festivals celebrated, the passing of life mourned. For that I had to rely on my own recollection of conversations and encounters.

From that quest came what I have called ‘faction’ writing, presenting actual observation through quasi-fictional means. My principal concern was not the recovery of factual material, but to decipher the inner lived experience of the community through stories, anecdotes, stray pieces of documentation. Memories of men in their twilight years can be very unreliable, filtering out the nasty bits in favour of a seamless narrative, but considered collectively they can lead to a consensus. That is how my ‘faction’ books, *Mr Tulsi’s Store: A Fijian Journey* and *Road from Mr Tulsi’s Store: Stories from Fiji* came about. The most satisfying thing about these books for me is that so many people of my generation, now scattered around the world, have found in my footsteps echoes of their own.

**POLITICAL FRAY**

The disintegration of the Fijian village life came from a confluence of circumstances flowing principally from the military coup of 1987 which overthrew a multi-ethnic government in which, for the
first time, Indo-Fijians had fair representation. The main targets of the coup supporters were Indo-Fijians. They were fair game for the rampaging mobs looting and ransacking homes, torching stores, terrorizing villagers. Fijian landlords were refusing to renew leases to Indo-Fijian tenants, forcing them to seek shelter in the mushrooming squatter settlements surrounding urban areas. The sight of balaclava-clad gun-carrying soldiers on the streets disturbed me. Such sights until then I had associated with violence-torn countries in Africa and Latin America. The efforts of generations of men and women of all ethnicities to find a democratic society that was just and tolerant of diversity had come to nought.

I joined those condemning the coup against the advice of colleagues to ‘preserve’ my neutrality as a scholar. But there can be no neutrality on the moral battlefield. The dominant public portrayal of the coup was as a straight-out racial conflict between a besieged indigenous group, the Fijians, against the nefarious designs of an immigrant coup, the Indo-Fijians. This portrayal garnered the coup makers much sympathy among the indigenous people of the Pacific region who saw the Fijian situation through their own lenses of disadvantage and deprivation. I argued from the very beginning that this was too simplistic a picture, that race was being used as a scapegoat for other interests threatened by the change of government: traditional high chiefs who saw the business of government as their entitlement, defeated politicians with no other profession to turn to, nationalist Fijian Christians who wanted to turn Fiji into a Christian state and other like-minded people. *Power and Prejudice: Making of the Fiji Crisis* (1988) expressed my interpretation of the Fijian crisis. Mine was not the most acceptable view in the charged atmosphere of Fiji then, but it is now a part of the general understanding of the coup.

I was still a practising scholar but was also getting attention as an ‘activist’ for democracy in Fiji. In this capacity, I often addressed political meetings, including a convention convened by the National Federation Party, the main party of the Indo-Fijians, gave
interviews on radio and television and wrote in the local newspapers. In short, I did everything I could to change public perceptions about the political situation in Fiji, to counter the coup narrative, to effect progressive change. The culmination of all this came in March 1995 when the Fijian parliament appointed a three-member Fiji Constitution Review Commission to review the post-coup 1990 Constitution and recommend a new one for Fiji. Its chair was Sir Paul Reeves, Anglican Archbishop and former Governor General of New Zealand, Tomasi Vakatora, a former government minister and Speaker of the House of Representatives, and me.

The 1990 post-coup Constitution, it is now universally accepted, was a draconian document that entrenched the agendas and ambitions of the coup makers. It entrenched electoral apartheid in Fiji. All seats in parliament were elected from racial constituencies, with Indo-Fijians grossly underrepresented in proportion to their total numbers. The offices of President, Prime Minister, Chief Justice, Commander of the military and Commissioner of Police, Chairmen of Public and Police Service Commissions were all reserved for indigenous Fijians. Race-based affirmative action policies for Fijians were put beyond the purview of the courts. It was this Constitution that the Commission was appointed to review.

Very few in Fiji gave the Commission any chance. The review, they said, was for show. A Prime Minister who had conducted the coup and decreed the racist Constitution was not about to have it changed. Many well-meaning friends and colleagues urged me not to accept the appointment. It was certainly the most important challenge I would ever face, the burden made heavier by the perception that I was carrying on my shoulders the hopes and aspirations of the entire Indo-Fijian community. If I failed, some members of the extended family reminded me, they would bear the cross for generations for my errors of omission and commission.

As part of our work, we toured all the corners of the country listening to the people, received hundreds of written submissions, commissioned papers from experts and visited Malaysia, Mauritius...
and South Africa to learn from their experience of constitution-making for their multi-ethnic societies. And then, over the course of twelve months, we mulled over the evidence and opened our hearts and minds to each other about the fears and aspirations of the diverse communities we represented. In a Commission of three, there was nowhere to hide. I cannot say it was an easy assignment for there were many moments of fear, anxiety and despair.

But we succeeded in the end. Our 800-page report with 795 recommendations, a solid year’s work, pointed Fiji in a new direction, away from Fiji’s past obsession with the politics of race and racial representation. Two-thirds of the seats in parliament should be non-racial and one-third reserved temporarily for the three principal communities in proportion to their size. Multi-ethnic societies must strive for multi-ethnic governments jettisoning the idea of one ethnic group having an entitlement to rule. Indigenous interests and concerns should be respected, and honoured within an overarching framework of democratic governance where the cultural and human rights of all communities were protected. Multi-ethnic coalitions should be aimed at.

We were delighted that we had squared the circle, broken the conundrum of Fiji politics. Our report was universally praised as a progressive and humane document whose recommendations could serve as a model for other multi-ethnic nations. And the Constitution based on our report was passed unanimously by parliament and blessed by the Great Council of Chiefs. On a personal note, I had passed my baptism of fire. I recall our young son Niraj saying to me when the invitation came for me to join the Reeves Commission, ‘Dad, you have written history, taught history, now you can make history and then become history’. I had made history, but the next phase would come a decade later.

The 1997 Constitution lasted twelve years when it was abrogated by another military coup, Fiji’s experiment in reconciliation rudely ruptured. We were once again back to square minus one. Dissidents and opposition figures were hauled up to the military barracks and
brutalized. Media was muzzled, the flow of information tightly con-
trolled. All rival centres of power – trade unions, churches, the Great
Council of Chiefs, civil society organizations –were hobbled, and
draconian decrees curtailed free speech and freedom of association.
I had no option but to accept the fight for democracy with renewed
vigour. Some social media commentators dubbed me the ‘con-
science of the nation’. I did not see myself that way in those grandiose
terms. I was doing what any decent human being would do: defend
the values of democracy, freedom of speech and the rule of law.

The military saw things differently. They were frustrated to see
their narrative trumped by mine. Tyrants want compliance not
criticism. Frank Bainimarama justified his coup as nothing more
than a ‘Clean Up Campaign’ to rid the country of corruption, but
flew into a rage when told that a military coup by any other name
is still a military coup, that treason was treason. When the military
justified the military intervention as a ‘good coup’, it read in the
papers that a garden variety definition of a military coup was rape
of democracy, and there was no ‘good rape’. I was clearly a thorn
in the military’s side. On 5 November 2009, I was deported from
Fiji after a brutal interrogation at the Queen Elizabeth Barracks,
warned that if I did not leave, my family would have to fetch my
body from the hospital morgue the next day.

In 2015, the Bainimarama government was asked why they had
deported us from Fiji. They said with a straight face that my wife
and I were a ‘threat to the peace and security of Fiji’. This from a
government with a 3,000 standing army at its command! The ban
was not due to any threat we posed to anyone but an act, in the
words of a distinguished New Zealand scholar, ‘of stupid, vindictive
pettiness’. Exiling people in this day and age is such an obsolete way
of dealing with dissent when national borders are transgressed, and
ideas smuggled through cyberspace at the click of a button. I lec-
ture to university students in Fiji; I address political conventions,
publish in the local newspapers, but am not allowed to enter the
country. The absurdity of the situation requires little comment.
So, we live out our last days far away from the land of our birth, battered but unbowed. To stand up for justice, the values of democracy and the freedom of speech, to defend the sanctity of the ballot box, is not a crime except in a dictatorship. Not to take a stand, to avert your eyes or look the other way, would be the real crime against humanity. That this grandson of a humble girmitya would never do. Truth shall triumph in the end. Satya Men Vijayte.

HIGHLIGHTS

Brij Vilash Lal was Emeritus Professor at The Australian National University and Honorary Professor at the University of Queensland. He taught History at the ANU, the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the University of the South Pacific and the University of Papua New Guinea. He was a Life Member of Clare Gall, University of Cambridge. He was the author of more than twenty books and editor of another twenty on the history and culture of the Indian diaspora and on the history and politics of Fiji. He died on 25 December 2021.

His honours included:

- Member of the Order of Australia given in Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II’s Birthday Honours List (2015)
- Interim Director, School of Culture, History and Language, ANU (2013)
- Centenary of Federation Medal, Government of Australia, for contribution to the Humanities (2003)
- President, Pacific History Association (2003)
- Fiji Millennium Committee’s section as One of 75 Men and Women who Shaped the History of Twentieth Century Fiji (1999)
- Commissioner, representing the Indo-Fijian community, on the Fiji Constitution Review Commission whose report formed the basis of Fiji’s 1997 Constitution
• Officer of the Order of Fiji given for his distinguished service to Fiji by President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara (1996)
• Elected Fellow of the Australian Humanities Academy (1996)

NOTE

1. The abstract and keywords were written by Dr Lynne Macedo.