Brij V. Lal & K.L. Gillion: The apprentice and the sorcerer

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ABSTRACT

Brij Lal was mentored by Ken Gillion during the former’s doctoral work at the Australian National University in the late-1970s. The resulting thesis was a pathbreaking quantitative analysis of the 45,439 North Indians who went to Fiji as indentured labourers between 1879 and 1916 – centering on such variables as the places of origin, their age, gender, marital status, caste, and family circumstances.¹ The much-reduced monograph that derived from the thesis is a thoroughgoing statistical profile that has stood the test of time and been a model for subsequent work.² So we can thank Ken Gillion for his part in the ‘making’ of Brij Lal. Gillion and Lal became good friends, each holding the other in high regard. I knew them both, Lal far better than Gillion. As will be seen, Lal and I have contrasting views on Gillion as a person and as a scholar. Bringing to bear

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my own observations dating back to 1973, the archival record and a reading of Gillion and Lal’s writings, I discuss the evolving relationship between these two major historians of Indo-Fijian indenture.

KEYWORDS
academic mentorship, Australian National University, Brij V. Lal, Fiji, historiography, indenture, Indo-Fijians, K.L. Gillion

STUDENT AND MENTOR

In the introduction to his last book, an edited collection of autobiographical essays by historians of the Pacific Islands, Brij Lal (1952–2021) noted the role of the thesis supervisor – the ‘inspirational men and women who go out of their way to nurture talent beyond the ordinary call of duty... This mentoring role goes largely unnoticed and unrewarded in the academy and is unlikely to fare much better in an age that demands refereed productivity and where bibliometrics seem to be all that matters’.3 In Lal’s case, one of his mentors was Ken Gillion (1929–1992), the historian of South Asia and of Indians in Fiji.4 The student–supervisor relationship can be a perilous terrain that sometimes ends in tears, with neither party wishing to renew acquaintance with the other. Lal and Gillion had some tense moments in the early days of Lal’s candidature, which was not helped by their disparate personalities. Whereas Gillion was withdrawn and judgemental, Lal was outgoing and altogether more socially integrated. Yet these two very different people developed a strong mutual regard that endured for the remaining fifteen years of Gillion’s life.

They first met at Nausori Airport when Gillion visited Fiji in May 1977 to start research on his projected (but never completed) general history of Fiji. At the time Gillion was a Senior Research Fellow in the (then) Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, and Lal had just been awarded a PhD scholarship at the ANU. This was a remarkable achievement for
someone whose parents were illiterate cane farmers in the back blocks of Vanua Levu. As Lal recalled of their first meeting, ‘When I addressed [Gillion] formally by his title, he looked at me straight as if he meant business and said, “Ken is the name”’.5 Arriving in Canberra a little later, Lal was attached to ANU’s South Asian History Unit. D.A. Low (1927–2015) was designated his official supervisor, and thus Lal became one of Low’s ‘sepoys’, as he called his PhD students.6 As well as being ANU’s Vice-Chancellor, Low was supervising four other PhD students, a work-overload that resulted in Gillion being allocated the task of Lal’s everyday mentoring, as distinct from being his de jure co-supervisor. Lal complicates matters by describing himself as Gillion’s last student, implying that Gillion was joint-supervisor of his PhD thesis but this was not the case at all.7

Despite the informality of the first meeting their early days were somewhat rocky. Touchy, introverted and aloof, Gillion was not easy to relate to, much less to get to know. It did not help that Gillion’s stubborn nature came up against the strong-willed impatience of Lal, who was a young man in a hurry. A mismatch of anxiety on Lal’s part and an ‘I-know-what’s-best-for-you’ attitude on Gillion’s threw their disparate personalities into sharp relief and created, for a while, an abrasive effect. As Lal told me, the problem centred on the choice of a PhD topic. His MA thesis had dealt in part with the Sikhs in Vancouver and he was allocated a comparable study on Fiji, but after a month he realised that the subject didn’t interest him.8 He wanted instead to write about the history of indenture but Gillion was discouraging. He felt that Lal might have nothing new to say considering his own earlier research in the field.9 Moreover, Ahmed Ali (1938–2005) was working on an oral history of the Fiji Indian indenture experience.10 Suddenly, Lal suggested that he should study the background and origins of indentured Indians to Fiji, which would complement Gillion’s work on their experience in Fiji. For reasons that Lal never found out, Gillion was receptive. It was quickly agreed that Lal should embark on a quantitative study
of the 45,439 emigrants to Fiji from North India, and the mini-crisis blew over.

In any case, each had got his own way. Gillion had long championed the cause of quantification, as one must in studies involving emigration/immigration where there is no point in floundering in a ‘statistical void’ or stumbling through a ‘quantitative fog’, to use Eric Richards’ phrases. He had come to this realisation when researching his own PhD thesis in the mid-1950s and the fruits are evident in the statistical tables in *Fiji’s Indian Migrants* the book that derived from the thesis. It began when he was in London and writing a paper for a seminar at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies on the sources of Indian immigration to Fiji. As he said to his own PhD supervisor (J.W. Davidson [1915–1973], the Professor of Pacific History at ANU), he was pleased with the way the paper was shaping up ‘although surprised to find myself pounding an adding machine as well as a typewriter’. He was just as pleased that his new student was contributing to the field in this way.

For Lal, the decision to work on a quantitative study of the origins of the North Indian indentured labourers to Fiji was more of a mixed blessing. He regarded quantification as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. As he said in his thesis, ‘quantification has helped us to answer the “how” (structural) questions of history, but not the “why” (causal) questions’. He later elaborated:

> Quantification yielded valuable results, in enabling me to see the shape and dimensions of an historical problem. From the very beginning, though, I was aware that quantification could answer only some questions and not others; questions related to the inner promptings of human motivation: why people behaved the way they did. Statistics could reveal the extent of mortality, for instance, but not the experience of dying.

And more recently: ‘Numbers … may define the scope of a problem but they cannot answer the great questions of human motivation and human agency’.
Nonetheless, Lal set about extracting the basic data from those 45,439 Emigration Passes. It took five months of solid work to enter the raw data onto code sheets, which were then fed into a computer. Lal thought that a sample would suffice – along the lines, say, of Lloyd Robson’s one-in-twenty sampling of convicts to eastern Australia, which itself started as a PhD at ANU. Gillion was adamant that Lal should examine every single Emigration Pass relating to North India, insisting that each person was important. It was tedious and concentrated work. I once asked how he managed to persist with such a mind-numbing task and he matter-of-factly replied, ‘It was a PhD. It had to be done’. He did later concede that Gillion’s advice was sound.

In another sense Lal had the last word. He always needed involvement and attachment before he could warm to a subject, and here was a topic where the heart and the head came together. As the grandson of an indentured labourer and the son of struggling cane farmers, he had a direct connection with his subject. In his later career his choice of subject always stemmed from a sense of engagement with his roots and a broader sense of involvement in his own society. As an undergraduate student at the University of the South Pacific in the early-1970s, it was a revelation to be introduced to ‘texts about my own past’, in books such as Gillion’s *Fiji’s Indian Migrants* and Adrian Mayer’s study of Indo-Fijian rural society. He mentions this several times in his publications. A similar sense of engagement partly explains his scholarly involvement with contemporary Fiji politics, the high point of which was being appointed one of three Constitution Review Commissioners in 1996. Quantification notwithstanding, Lal’s subject matter enabled him to remain engrossed in what he was doing. Lal never subscribed to the view that a sense of detachment from one’s subject was a guarantee of impartiality and so-called objectivity in a historian.
LAL AND TINKER

Given their dispositions, I always thought that Lal would have been a better match with Gillion’s great equal and opposite, Hugh Tinker (1921–2000), also an historian of Indians overseas but far more fluent in Hindi than Gillion and endowed with a sense of direct social and personal involvement. Like Lal, who described himself as ‘a spectateur engagé, a politically engaged but independent intellectual’, Tinker was of activist disposition. He straddled the worlds of academic history and political engagement: in both he always wore his heart on his sleeve.

Tinker’s inability to be neutral or detached about anything ought to have struck a responsive chord with Lal. Instead, Lal got caught up in the ill-feeling between Gillion and Tinker, who were polar opposites in personality and in their approaches to life and affairs, which in turn was reflected in their respective academic outlooks. In Tinker’s view, Gillion hedged his bets and was ‘perhaps a little too concerned to be “balanced”’ and sometimes held back ‘from the most searching probe into the sordid’. For his part, Gillion disparaged Tinker for being incorrigibly ‘moralistic’. The claim that Gillion eschewed the sordid is without foundation given his explicit depiction of the grossness of plantation life, not to mention his forthright chapters on the campaign to end Indian indenture in Fiji and the plight of repatriated labourers. In this regard, Lal makes the telling point that Gillion, in accusing Tinker of being ‘deliberately moralistic’, seemed blissfully unaware that the description applied equally to himself. Gillion’s strong identification with the contemporary critics of Indian indenture and his appropriation of the missionaries’ moralistic vocabulary likewise stands in contrast with his ‘normally austere and balanced style of exposition’.

Lal and Tinker, one would think, are the natural pairing, but they were always at arm’s length (in fact they never met) – partly because Lal was influenced by Gillion’s assessment that Tinker dashed off unscholarly books that lacked an archival base (how
else could he write so many so quickly?), partly because he strongly disagreed with Tinker’s indenture-as-slavery formulation, and partly because Tinker unjustly reviewed one of Lal’s earlier essays. In a volume brought out for the centenary of *girmit* in Fiji, Lal contributed a chapter that summarized many of his detailed findings on the origins of the Fiji Indians. Tinker dismissed it as ‘fill[ing] out the existing picture of migration in greater detail, rather than presenting a different picture’. The implication that Lal had failed to go beyond Gillion’s earlier work is quite simply wrong. But coming so early in his career, from a leading authority in the field, and being said in the major area journal, was not appreciated.

**THE GENTLE ART OF SUPERVISION**

Lal later reflected that ‘the supervisor-student relationship must be based on trust and confidence and a large dose of mutual respect. It is an unequal, dependent relationship and it can be fraught. And it is always useful to remind students it is their own thesis they are writing, not their supervisor’s’. This was greatly at variance with Gillion’s notions of being a supervisor, and it fits with the experience of John Young, who was Gillion’s departmental colleague at the University of Adelaide in South Australia. Young embarked on a PhD thesis on the settler community in pre-cession Fiji with Gillion being appointed his *in situ* supervisor and Davidson the external supervisor. As we have seen in Lal’s case, Gillion had most decided views on matters concerning the choice of thesis topic and methodology. So too with Young, who recalls Gillion’s somewhat drastic reaction to the draft of his (Young’s) first chapter: ‘He came to my office one day and told me, very politely, that he felt that our ideas and approaches were very different and that he did not wish to be involved any more’. Gillion wanted Young to engage in the sort of quantification on display in his recently-published *Fiji’s Indian Migrants*, which Young had no interest in doing.
Gillion was initially stern and austere but Lal had no complaints. At an early juncture, when Lal asked how he should proceed, Gillion gave him the daunting advice:

*that if after six months of reading in the library, I was not on top of my subject, the most knowledgeable person in the world, I should not be doing graduate work. That kind of confidence could be debilitating, but it was fairly standard fare then. Students who had arrived on scholarships to pursue graduate work had gone through a rigorous process of selection, and the best thing that could be done for them, it was thought, was to leave them alone to get on with their work.*

That is much what happened to Gillion when he himself arrived at ANU as a PhD student in 1955. Within six months he had produced a rounded bibliography and a detailed thesis outline which differed little from the eventual thesis. Davidson was greatly impressed, later remarking that ‘[o]f all the students I have had, Gillion probably needed the least guidance in the earlier stages of his work’. That was Gillion’s expectation of Lal, even though in other respects he had been a needy and demanding postgraduate student himself (Munro n.d.). Tough love of this sort was indeed ‘fairly standard fare’ with Gillion’s generation of postgraduate students. When J.A. Barnes arrived at ANU as Professor of Anthropology in 1958, which was the same year that Gillion submitted his PhD thesis, he adopted the ‘shock tactic’ of ignoring the intellectual needs of newly-arrived research students during their first six months, the idea being to weed out any weak students. This process of natural selection provided reasonable assurance that the survivors were ‘temperamentally ready to work on their own’, whether in the library or especially in the field. Lal imbibed that ethic and he felt that many postgraduate students during his years as an academic needed too much handholding, although he didn’t express himself in quite those terms. Indeed, the supervision Lal received was hardly hands-on.
Gillion ‘refused further involvement in supervising’ once Lal’s proposal had been submitted. For his part, Low asked Lal ‘to show him only the good final draft [of his thesis] rather than individual chapters’ as they came out.

As mentioned, Lal described himself as Gillion’s last postgraduate student but so far as I can ascertain he and Young were Gillion’s only such students – certainly at the doctoral level. Gillion would not have done any PhD supervision when he taught at the University of Western Australia between 1958 and 1962. During that time at UWA postgraduate numbers were low; there was little provision for PhD studies, and South Asian history as a teaching subject was only just getting off the ground. Moving to the University of Adelaide in 1963, he did start off as John Young’s internal PhD supervisor, only to abandon ship. I have consulted a listing of higher history degree students at the University of Adelaide and cross-checked their names against the University of Adelaide Library’s online catalogue. None did wrote thesis on a South Asian topic. The irony is that Gillion was not Lal’s formal supervisor meaning that he never officially supervised a PhD student to completion. And complete Lal did. In early 1980, after three years’ ordeal by thesis, he submitted a two-volume PhD thesis subtitled ‘Origins and background of Fiji’s North Indian migrants, 1879–1916’.

Lal recalls that Gillion ‘was initially reserved towards me, but once he knew that I was serious about research, he lightened up’. Another dimension was that ‘Ken was a person of reserved temperament, who opened up with time when he was reassured that I did not intend to tread on his turf or prove a difficult customer’. What helped break the ice was Gillion being very fond of Brij and Padma’s daughter Yogi, who was then a toddler. He called her ‘Baby Krishna’ because she reminded him of paintings of the plump and mischievous young Lord Krishna, and he kept a supply of biscuits that Yogi liked. He sometimes took the Lal family to his country cottage in Braidwood, some 90 kilometres from Canberra, and
occasionally took Brij for a drive around Canberra in his light green Honda car. What had started as a somewhat testy relationship blossomed into an abiding friendship.

My own view of Gillion is rather different. We overlapped as residents at University House, Canberra in the six months after Gillion’s arrival at ANU in September 1973. I had just finished my Masters qualifying thesis and he was about to take up his Senior Research Fellowship. I found him lacking in human warmth, dismissive, and more than inclined to be censorious. There was a general air of negativity about him, I thought. As Davidson so accurately remarked, Gillion had an ‘an excessive and rather quirky moralism that led him to condemn too readily persons and points of view that he found uncongenial’.49 Another ANU colleague described Gillion as ‘nervous, tense and diffident’, with Davidson adding that he is ‘an exceptionally retiring man who often seems ill at ease with people whom he does not know well’.50

In 1977, when passing through Fiji on my way to fieldwork in Tuvalu, I also discovered how selfish he could be. He was staying at a double-storey house at Suva Point, which was owned by the ANU for use by visiting researchers from the university. A car went with the house, which Gillion refused to share with a PhD student from his own department, even when he wasn’t using it.

Gillion and Lal did not lose contact in the twelve or so years after Gillion left Canberra in the sad circumstances of his Senior Research Fellowship at ANU not being renewed. Disillusioned at the University of Adelaide, he had taken the calculated risk of resigning from a tenured Readership in the hope that his five-year Fellowship at ANU would be converted into a permanent position, but a financial crisis at ANU ended any such hopes. Only forty nine years of age when he lost his job, Gillion sold his library and departed for Sydney soon after.51 He abandoned his plans to write general histories of Fiji and Vanuatu, and opted out of academic life almost entirely. To my knowledge the only instance of academic activity during this time was assisting Ralph Shlomowitz locate sources for
the latter’s study of the demographic and economic aspects of indentured labour in Fiji.52 Ever the recluse, he declined media requests for commentary following the 1987 Fiji coups.53 He and Lal kept in touch, speaking to each other ‘over the phone once a month or so, about nothing in particular, really, just exchanging ideas about current events, about Fiji and about people we knew in common’.54 The affection between the two endured to the end.

LAL’S ASSESSMENT OF FIJI’S INDIAN MIGRANTS

In his PhD thesis, Lal described Fiji’s Indian Migrants as ‘a balanced interpretation of Indian indenture’:

Gillion viewed indentured not as an issue in Indian nationalist politics, as Andrews [India and the Pacific (1937)] had done, nor as a barometer to gauge India’s political image, as Kondapi [Indians Overseas: 1838–1949 (1951)] or Gangulee [Indians in the Empire Overseas (1947)] had done, nor, indeed, as a purely troublesome issue in imperial relations, which is what Cumpston [Indians Overseas in British Territories, 1834–1854 (1956)] had tended to do. Rather, he attempted to delineate the structure and meaning of the indenture system in a scholarly way, and not least from the perspective of the indentured labourer himself. His book provides a composite and comprehensive account of the causes and consequences of introducing 60,000 Indian immigrants into Fiji, their origins in India, life on the plantations in Fiji, and subsequent settlement and repatriation. It discusses, too, the setting up of the indenture system, its supervision and administration in India and in Fiji, and its eventual abolition in 1917. Based on a wide variety of sources, the book avoids polemics or any rigid moral, political or ideological direction.55

Lal tactfully went on to say:

Despite its comprehensive research, however, there are in Fiji’s Indian Migrants several lacunae and many important issues that merit greater attention. These relate more especially to the background of the migrants in
India. They are taken up in this study, which covers some of the same ground as Gillion’s work, but asks different questions and employs different sources and methods.56

As time went on, however, Lal became less enamoured of Fiji’s Indian Migrants, although one would not have thought so from the description in his affectionate obituary of Gillion:

The book is remarkable for its depth of research in archives in Fiji, London, New Delhi and other places in India and for its concern to provide a balanced picture of the problem. Balance is a word that Ken cherished. It is remarkable in another respect as well. At a time when scholars writing on the labour trade in the Pacific and Asia were still concentrating on questions of high policy, imperial concerns, the administration of the system, Ken was concentrating on the human aspects of the system: who were the indentured labourers who migrated to Fiji? What was their social and economic background? What was life on the plantations like? What was the legacy of indenture? In short the book is a remarkable contribution to social history. Thirty years after publication, some of the book’s conclusions have been enlarged, refined or revised; nonetheless, it is still an important starting point for any enquiry into the history of the Indo-Fijian community.57

One makes allowances for what is said in obituaries. But a few years earlier, when I said to Lal that Gillion would have been ‘a hard act to follow’, his measured and somewhat unenthusiastic response surprised me:

Fiji’s Indian Migrants is still a standard starting point, but it is a product of its time. I think what Gillion was trying to do was to maintain ‘balance’. I have looked at the same records that he looked at, and many more. I have the sense that he did not mine as much out of the historical evidence as he might have. He was loath to upset the balance of perspective, so everyone gets their share of his attention. As a historian Ken was making an evaluation of the total system and he attempts to provide a complete picture of the entire experience. I admire his work to that extent. It is what helps to make it an
It is certainly true that Lal wrote journal articles in the 1980s on aspects of the indenture system in Fiji – particularly on suicide and women labourers – which superseded his mentor’s briefer explanations and sometimes pointed to other conclusions. Lal also wrote a chapter for a collection of historiographic essays that he and I co-edited, in which he offered a somewhat cautious assessment of Fiji’s Indian Migrants that was generally upbeat nonetheless. But privately he agreed with Davidson that ‘Gillion made rather less of his material than he might have done. He is a man of great austerity of mind. He will at times commit himself to the most forthright expressions of opinion on issues that he regards as essentially moral ones; but, in the interpretation of documents, his scrupulousness induces a degree of caution that often seems to me to be excessive’.

Lal considered Gillion’s second book, an urban history of Ahmedabad, far superior to Fiji’s Indian Migrants. As he said to me, ‘I told Ken that I thought Ahmedabad was his best book, and he agreed. It was certainly very well received by Indian historians, and it is one of the most beautifully produced books on India I have ever seen’. Moreover, Lal greatly appreciated that Gillion was ‘genuinely concerned to communicate research in the intelligent language of ordinary discourse to an audience beyond the halls of the academy’.

TO END ON A PERSONAL NOTE

I only learned by degrees the extent of Brij’s diminishing regard for Fiji’s Indian Migrants. In 2019, when researching a journal article on the Tinker–Gillion controversy, Brij could not have been more helpful in responding to my enquiries. But when working on a follow-up paper (‘K.L. Gillion and the making of Fiji’s Indian Migrants’) I did sense an increasing lack of enthusiasm, with Brij finally describing Fiji’s Indian Migrants as
a book of and for its time. Certainly it was better than Cumpston [Indians Overseas in British Territories, 1834–1854 (1956)], Dwarka Nath [A History of Indians in British Guiana (1950)], K. Hazareesingh [History of Indians in Mauritius (1950)] and others, but that is not saying much…. Read today, the book feels decidedly old fashioned. I am being very candid with you, as you would expect me to be. I have no doubt you will find something more imaginative and exciting to devote your considerable research energies to.

I suspect that his unease stemmed from the incongruity ‘that I have more regard for Fiji’s Indian Migrants than you do, and you have greater regard for Ken as a person than I ever will’.66 Brij was well aware that Gillion was not my favourite person whereas he preferred to emphasize the reservoir of kindness that lurked beneath Gillion’s austere and aloof carapace but which seldom surfaced. During my first proper conversation with Brij, back in early-1980, I passed an uncomplimentary remark about Gillion, to which Brij quietly responded, ‘Ken is the kindest man I know’. I never put it to Brij directly but I surmised that his reluctance to discuss Fiji’s Indian Migrants with me any further was a function of loyalty to Gillion’s memory: he felt somewhat compromised at being party to adverse comments about his former mentor’s idiosyncrasies of temperament.

I was unfussed. Brij and I had known each other long enough to be able to agree to disagree, and I realized that the e-mail was Brij’s way of getting me off his back about Ken Gillion and his works. Surveying our e-mail exchanges, I realize that he was likely becoming uncomfortable with my repeated enquiries. That aside, Brij had no grounds for objection, at least in principle, to my choice to engage in further research on Ken Gillion. He knew perfectly well that I always do my own thing, as the saying goes, just as he did his. As he said about himself in one of his last pieces of writing, ‘I have always danced to the time of my own music, responding to my own inner promptings and quest’.67

We kept in touch on other matters and on Christmas Eve 2021, which happened to fall on a Friday, he sent me an e-mail. Knowing
that I have drinks with friends on Friday evenings, he hoped that I was ‘not holding back from smashing a few good beers!’ I assured him that I had done just that, nostalgically adding, ‘We met over forty years ago (in the Records Room of the Dept of Pacific and SE Asian History [ANU]) and your friendship and support ever since is one of the better things in my life. Hang in there, mate. It’s about all we can do at our wretched age and stage’. I was one of the few who knew the extent of Brij’s ill health but had not the slightest inkling that he only had a few more hours of life left in him. He died peacefully the following morning, on Christmas day of all days. I got the news that afternoon and, in the despair of losing an old and very dear friend, our different perspectives on Ken Gillion and his book seemed so unimportant.

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55. Lal, ‘Leaves of the Banyan Tree’, vol. 1, p. 18. By way of clarification, 45,439 North Indian indentured labourers arrived in Fiji. They were the subject of Lal’s PhD thesis. The balance comprised South Indians, taking the total to 60,000.
59. The three articles were republished in Lal, Chalo Jahaji, pp. 167–238.
60. Lal, ‘Passage Across the Sea’.
64. Lal, Mr Tulsi’s Store, pp. x–xi.
65. Munro, ‘The Tinker-Gillion Controversy’.
67. Lal, ‘Long Winding Road from Tabia’.