Introduction

Amar Wahab

Amar Wahab is Professor in Gender and Sexuality at the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies, York University, Canada.

This issue celebrates the lives and scholarly contributions of historians, Professor Brij Lal (1952–2021) and Professor Brinsley Samaroo (1940–2023) who were pivotal to the founding and development of the field of indentureship studies across the globe. Professor Brij Vilash Lal was Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University and Honorary Professor at the University of Queensland, and Professor Brinsley Samaroo was Emerita Professor in History at the University of the West Indies and the University of Trinidad and Tobago. Their recent passings have left us in a state of sadness and grief, but it is in this space of collective mourning that we pay tribute to the powerful legacies of their scholarly publications, their public activism, and their work to build and nourish community in the interest of intellectual, social, and political justice. Their work will no doubt inspire generations to come, and they will forever be remembered as key figures in the field of indentureship studies.

The collection begins with short life-writing pieces written by Professors Lal and Samaroo about their lives and scholarship. Professor Lal’s ‘A girmitya’s grandson’ recounts his own life story, focusing on his indentured ancestors, his education and scholarly research on indentureship in Fiji, as well as his scholarly-political activism within the context of ethnic tensions in postcolonial Fiji. Similarly, Professor Samaroo’s ‘Girmitya antecedents’ recounts the context of his early years in Ecclesville, Trinidad, in the aftermath of
indenture. He mainly focuses on his education in Trinidad, India and the United Kingdom and his involvement in national politics in Trinidad and Tobago. Both autobiographies were written by Professors Lal and Samaroo just before their passing and offer us a clearer picture of their own personal and public life stories – in their own words – that we have only glimpsed in their formidable corpus of academic scholarship. We are very honoured to feature the first publication of both pieces in this memorial issue.

These pieces are followed by three invited tribute articles written by scholars who have worked with and/or been strongly influenced by the extensive scholarship on indentureship of both Professors Lal and Samaroo. These articles are a testament to their seminal contributions and ground-breaking intellectual energies over decades of unwavering commitment to intellectual community-building, which has been a key pillar in nurturing the field of indentureship studies. Professor Patricia Mohammed’s tribute – ‘The generous genius of Brinsley Samaroo’ – connects her own reflections on Professor Samaroo’s scholarship and generous collegiality with the reflections of Professor Samaroo’s daughter, Kavita Samaroo, those of UWI Professor in Gender and Development Studies, Dr Gabrielle Jamela Hosein, and professional journalist, Richard Charran. Through this approach, Professor Mohammed’s tribute allows us to see the complex layers of scholarly practice, intellectual community-making, mentoring, kinship and vibrant friendships that Professor Samaroo made possible. The piece is also quite unique in that it offers a refreshing collaborative methodological approach to life-writing that we have not seen much of in studies of indentureship. Equally compelling in its power of tribute and its methodological ingenuity is Professor Margaret Mishra’s ‘Unveiling stereotypes about Fiji’s girmitiya women’. Dr Mishra pays homage to the crucial scholarly work of Professor Lal, which in part, critiqued the ways in which British colonial patriarchal violence served to police and silence indentured women in Fiji. Building on Professor Lal’s work, Dr Mishra extends her own critical excavation of racialized misogynistic stereotypes of
indentured women through her own work. This is as much a tribute in terms of acknowledging the intellectual paths that Professor Lal’s work made possible as it is methodologically innovative in its critical feminist extension of Professor Lal’s scholarly legacies.

This is followed by Dr Gabrielle Jamela Hosein’s article – ‘The botanical afterlife of indenture: Mehndi as imaginative visual archive’ – which focuses on mehndi as a ‘post-indenture feminist praxis’ to explore the botanical legacies of indenture in the Caribbean. Dr Hosein’s project is inspired by Professor Samaroo’s article, ‘Changing Caribbean geographies: Connections in flora, fauna and patterns of settlement from Indian inheritances’ (2021) yet extends this scholarly legacy through a feminist fabulation of the visual archive of post-indentureship. The articles by both Drs Mishra and Hosein demonstrate the promise and power of both Professor Lal’s and Professor Samaroo’s scholarly legacies to propel the field of indentureship studies into critical, creative and vibrant directions.

The final tribute piece by Professor Bridget Brereton – ‘Brinsley Samaroo, historian (1940–2023)’ – is the transcript of a public keynote speech delivered as the Brinsley Samaroo Legacy Lecture in the annual History Fest of the Department of History, University of the West Indies at the Alma Jordan Library, UWI, St Augustine, in March 2024. Professor Brereton recounts Professor Samaroo’s contributions to the political landscape in Trinidad and Tobago over several decades and analyses his formative role in establishing and broadening the scholarly projects of Indo-Trinidadian and Indo-Caribbean history. The memorial section of the issue ends with visual tributes to Professors Samaroo and Lal that depict different moments in their lives as scholars and public intellectuals.

What follows is a series of interviews, exhibition and book reviews, and poems, which are not explicitly focused on the scholarship of Professors Lal and Samaroo but are dedicated to their memory. In ‘Stories of reclamation, speculation and joy: An interview with Dutch-Surinamese artist, Nazrina Rodjan’, Amar Wahab, interviews Dutch-Surinamese visual artist, Nazrina Rodjan, about
her recent exhibition, *Kala Pani:1873–2023*, which creatively intervenes in discourses about race, gender, queerness and indentureship in the Netherlands. In “‘All you have to do is be your freest self on the field”: In conversation with Keshav Maharaj’, Professor David Dabydeen and Ben Jacob interview South African cricketer Keshav Maharaj – South Africa’s most successful spinner since the nation’s readmission to international sport in 1991 – who ‘reflects on the legacies of indentureship, being part of South Africa’s post-apartheid generation, his journey to the top of cricket, and his achievements on the international stage’. The interviews are followed by: Dr Kavyta Raghunandan’s exhibition review of ‘*Indo + Caribbean: The creation of a culture* exhibition at the Museum of London Docklands (May–November 2023)’ to mark the 75th anniversary celebrations of the UK’s Empire Windrush. Four book reviews follow: (a) Dr Purba Hossain’s review of Ashutosh Bhardwaj’s and Judith Misrahi-Barak’s (eds.) *Kala Pani Crossings: Revisiting 19th Century Migrations from India’s Perspective* (Routledge, 2022), (b) Dr Goolam Vahed’s review of Jonathan Connolly’s *Worthy of Freedom: Indenture and Free Labor in the Era of Emancipation* (University of Chicago Press, 2024), and (c) Dr Michael Mitchell’s reviews of Jennifer Rahim’s *Goodbye Bay* (Peepal Tree Press, 2023) and Ryhaan Shah’s *Weaving Water* (Cutting Edge Press, 2013). The issue ends with a breathtaking collection of poems on indentureship: Dr Devarakshanam Betty Govinden’s ‘Marigolds’ and Ashley Anthony’s ‘Hair’, ‘Kanaima’, and ‘The Remainder’.

The issue is dedicated to Professors Lal and Samaroo.