

Bearing Witness to *Bearing Witness*¹

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By extraordinary coincidence, it is 40 years ago to the day that Brij Lal took up his PhD scholarship at the Australian National University (ANU) – on 1st August 1977. He has since taught at the University of the South Pacific (USP) and the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa, as well as a half-year at the University of Papua New Guinea. But the bulk of his career has been at the ANU. His association with the ANU was revived in 1990 with the award of a Senior Research Fellowship, and in 1997 when he became a full professor, eventually retiring in 2016. He likes to joke that he arrived as a young prick and left as an old fart. That said, it is altogether fitting that *Bearing Witness* has appeared under the imprint of the ANU Press, given that Brij spent the bulk of his career at the ANU.

We first met almost 38 years ago, in 1979, in the Records Room of what was then ANU’s Department of Pacific & SE Asian History. It means, among other things, that Brij and I were in the last cohort of PhD students to write their theses without the wonders of word processing. At

¹ *Bearing Witness: Essays in Honour of Brij V. Lal*, Doug Munro and Jack Corbett (eds) (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017). The book is available as a free download: <https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/state-society-and-governance-melanesia/bearing-witness>

² The present paper is an expanded version of a speech, on 1 August 2017, during the launch of *Bearing Witness*, at the Australian National University – which, in turn, draws on my (unpublished) ‘Tribute to Brij Lal on the Occasion of his Retirement’, 26 February 2016. The many acknowledgements that prefaced my address at the launch have been omitted but Jack Corbett and I, nonetheless, must thank Emily Hazelwood and her team at the ANU Press. Since I was last involved with a book for the same publisher the Press’s procedures are more elaborate and have become correspondingly bureaucratic. At the same time, its level of editorial assistance is exemplary. We also appreciate the Press people’s readiness to work *with* authors and editors in order to produce the best result.

the time I was a postgraduate student at Macquarie University in Sydney and I happened to be visiting Canberra. I was in my early-thirties, and at that time had a flat stomach and sported a full head of hair. The other person in the Records Room was a skinny Indo-Fijian with jet-black hair and beard. That was Brij in those days, when he was working on the social origins of Fiji Indians (Lal, 1983). As a friendly gesture, he approached and asked if I was ‘doing Asian History’, to which I replied in the negative. Brij and I are not often lost for words but that was the end of the conversation, before it had hardly begun. We disengaged, as people do in awkward social situations – and that is the story of how our friendship almost didn’t begin. But we got to know each other soon enough, first when Brij gave a seminar presentation and then during an extended conversation shortly before departing for USP on my first lecturing position. It was a one-year contract and it turned out that I was keeping Brij’s seat warm until he finished his PhD and returned to his old job.

We struck up a friendship, which became increasingly close and trusting down the years. It is not simply a matter of reading each other’s papers, swapping news, passing on references, enjoying each other’s company when I visit Canberra or when we meet at conferences. It is more than turning to each other for advice in times of adversity and confiding with each other without confidences being broken. It’s not simply a case of our lamenting what universities have become. It’s also a case of the unspoken support and affection of trusted friends who will always be there for each other.

He has had quite an influence on me in both word and deed. In the mid-1980s, he asked me to comment on the draft of his paper on ‘non-resistance among Indian plantation workers in Fiji (Lal, 1986). This solidified my interest in the Pacific Islands labour trade and led to a specialist interest in issues of resistance and accommodation on plantations. We went on to co-edit the collection of essays that became *Plantation Workers*, to which I wrote a lengthy introduction. It’s somewhat frightening to think, many years later, that I still think of this as one of the best things I’ve ever written (Munro 1993: 1–43). ‘Haven’t I improved since then?’ I ask myself. It is also the case that *The Ivory Tower and Beyond*, my book of biographical essays on Pacific historians, was written at Brij’s suggestion, over dinner at a Malaysian restaurant, when he came to Wellington for a conference (Munro 2009).

Brij and I have much in common as historians. We are both proud, defiant empiricists who believe that analysis is embedded in the narrative. We believe in the value of clear, unambiguous writing and we are both theoretically undernourished, but healthy enough all the same. He leaves

that sort of navel-gazing to others. Garrett Mattingly's statement – that 'the historical profession, instead of growing steadily forward through experience and self-criticism to deeper understanding and sturdier, more penetrating vision, just swings aimlessly back and forth with the tides of fashion, much like the ladies' garment industry' – rings true to our ears (quoted in Kammen 1982: 13). But in other ways our paths have diverged. I started off as an historian of the Pacific Islands, and this was all I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Something happened along the way; the Pacific no longer holds the interest it once did and I have switched to what might be described as 'telling academic lives'. I now consider myself a biographer as much as an historian. Brij has been more single-minded. His research and writing has focussed overwhelmingly on Fiji, which includes a considerable corpus on the very recent past. By contrast, I am ensconced in the comparative safety of more distant decades. My only foray into writing history as it was unfolding was the co-authorship of a book on the collapse of the National Bank of Fiji (Grynberg, Munro and White 2002) – very much a one-off exercise.

Brij explains that he 'made a conscious decision from very early on to write about my own people and my own country. I did not want to be an intruder on someone else's past' (Lal 2011: 119). That said, it is too simple to think of Brij as a narrow specialist whose knowledge of the Pacific stops at Fiji. He is widely read and deeply informed on Pacific history generally, having been an editor, successively, of *The Contemporary Pacific* and the *Journal of Pacific History*, not to mention postgraduate supervision. One only has to read to his overview chapter in *Tides of History: The Pacific Islands in the Twentieth Century* to be convinced (Lal 1994: 435–61). In any case, his work on Fiji involves four disparate strands, which overlap and inform one another, and which, in fact, extend beyond Fiji. The range of his interests did pose challenges when Jack Corbett and I were planning the shape and content of *Bearing Witness* and in securing contributors to the volume.³

The first strand is his work on indentured Indo-Fijians. He is best known for *Girmityas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Lal, 1983). A compression and revision of his PhD thesis, *Girmityas* is essentially a computer-analysis of the 60,945 labourers from Northwest India to Fiji

between 1879 and 1916, dealing with such variables as caste, place of origin, age, family groupings and gender. He once described himself as 'the genealogist of the *girmityas*' (Lal, 2013: 298). As it happens, *Girmityas* is not the only such quantitatively-based study of labour flows in the Pacific – two PhD students were simultaneously crunching their numbers at the James Cook University of North Queensland (Moore 1985; Mercer 1995) and Dorothy Shineberg's later book on Pacific Island labourers in New Caledonia likewise has a solid quantitative underpinning (Shineberg 1995, 1999). *Girmityas* was immediately recognised as a major contribution to the study of Indian indentured servitude in its approach and content. The four contributors to the section on 'Indenture' in *Bearing Witness* acknowledge the impact of *Girmityas* on their work. It is amazing that a young man's book (and such a short book at that) continues, almost 35 years later, to exert such an influence.

The second strand in the corpus of writings flows from the first. Having traced the origins of the *girmityas*, he followed them to work site and, in the mid-eighties, wrote a trio of important articles on the plantation experience – on the incidence of suicide, the plight of women and the issue of 'non-resistance' (republished in Lal 2000: 167–238). Brij often uses the metaphors of travel – odyssey, journey, voyage, banishment, sojourn. Having traced the origins of Indo-Fijians and followed them to their place of employment, he continued his literary travels with a steady stream of reflections on the legacy of the indenture experience in both Fiji and the Caribbean.

A third string in Brij's bow is the political history of contemporary Fiji. He has written extensively on the subject, closely following developments. Much of it is informed commentary, or what might be described as 'instant history' – i.e. analyses written during or soon after the event. Brij has mounted spirited defences of such work, pointing out that proximity in time has its advantages (eg. Lal 2011: 39–57). It is accepted that most instant history, perforce, is written without recourse to archival sources. On the other hand, Brij's history of 20th century Fiji (*Broken Waves*) is unusual among general histories in being firmly based on primary documentation (Lal 1992). It is notable that all four contributors to *Bearing Witness* (in the section 'Fiji Politics') state their admiration of *Broken Waves*. Again, it is remarkable that a young man's book has had such an effect on seasoned scholars. Historical writing has an in-built obsolescence but Brij's works have an enduring quality, as instanced by the number of citations they receive in the latest book on contemporary Fiji (Robertson, 2017).

Brij's forays into contemporary history are informed by a liberal

³ There are opportunities lost with any edited collection. I greatly regret that John Weaver of McMaster University in Canada, who was asked to write a chapter on Brij's carefully-calibrated work on plantation suicides, declined through pressure of other commitments. Weaver and I have collaborated in the study of suicide in 20th century New Zealand (eg. Weaver and Munro 2013).

democratic outlook that deplores Fiji's coup culture and the direction of Fijian political life (Chen, 2017). In his view, silence is not an option (Lal 2011: 5, 138, 305). Brij is uncomfortable at being described a public intellectual, but that is what he is: he fulfils the minimal definition of having a recognised expertise (or 'cultural authority'), a constituency, and he uses various media outlets to get his message across (Collini 2006: 52).

Finally, there are Brij's forays into social history, which in his case involves writing in a more creative vein through the medium of semi-fiction (or 'faction'). It started with short stories about his home village and extended to urban Fiji. His depiction of rural life is devoid of nostalgia. Rather, he sets out to recapture a world that he is glad to have escaped, while the stories with an urban setting depict the hardships of daily life, the turmoil of personal relationships and the frequent enough injustices of social interactions. Just as, in the historical work, he followed the Indian labour diaspora beyond Fiji to the Caribbean, in his fiction he follows Indo-Fijians to Australia, and a theme in these stories is the strains of adjusting to a new environment and the tensions and compromises involved of seeing one's offspring embrace the norms of Australian society in preference over their India heritage.

The constant running through all of Brij's writing is a sense of engagement with his roots, even if he has turned his back on village life. As he has often said, writing becomes pointless, at least for him, unless the heart and the head come together. My friend Allen Wells, who contributed to the *Plantation Workers* book, noted that writing from a personal connection 'makes it a labour of love'. Wells only had that feeling once, with a book (*Tropical Zion*) involving his father, a World War II Jewish refugee who found unlikely refuge in an agricultural settlement in the Dominican Republic (Wells 2009). Writing *Tropical Zion*, said Wells, 'was a wonderful experience' (e-mail, 15 July 2017). It was Wells's single such experience whereas Brij does it all the time.

The result is a prodigious published output – there are almost a dozen monographs; 31 edited collections, including major encyclopaedias; three volumes of fiction, two volumes of his selected essays; and scores of journal articles and book chapters. It reminds me what was said about another historian, Asa Briggs: 'While less historians [like myself] fiddle over footnotes, Briggs dashes off reviews; while they ruminate over reviews, he completes articles; while they agonize over articles, he manufactures books; and while they bother over books, he produces multi-volume works' (Cannadine 1991: 172). Such is the extent and variety of his output that I found it far more difficult to compile the bibliography of his writings for *Bearing Witness* than I did in writing my own chapter for

the book.

The accomplishments, however, have been accompanied by costs. Speaking truth to power resulted in both Padma and himself being expelled from Fiji in 2009 (Lal, 2011: 303–06), the expulsions re-confirmed in 2015. The grounds for these decisions – that his and Padma's activities are 'prejudicial to the peace, defence, public safety, public order and security of Government of Fiji' – beggars credulity and confirms that politics without principles becomes an exercise in the pursuit of power for its own sake alone. His attitude remains one of unrepentant defiance:

We have done no wrong, we have broken no law, we are not criminals. All that I have done is stand up for the values of true representative democracy, processes of transparent governance, the rule of law and free, unfettered speech. They may ban me from Fiji, but they will not be able to ban my ideas nor steal my memory. "The music must play on; the lights must never go out". Fiji will always be in my heart wherever I live (*Fiji Times*, 13 August 2017).

There are also regrets about the direction that universities are heading and Brij has made no secret that he feels deeply about this; his misgivings were being expressed six years ago (Lal, 2011: 1–7, 127–38). Symptomatic of his concerns was the closure of the Records Room where we first met all those years ago. Its collections, which took years to build up, were dissipated by administrative fiat and the holdings scattered to the four winds. They were there one day and gone the next week by the stroke of a pen.

In short, the academic world he entered is not the one he left behind. Yesterday his valedictory lecture (which he calls his 'Extinguished Lecture') was published (Lal 2017)⁴ and he reiterates his dismay that the 'sunny confidence we had in our ability to make a difference, to make the world a better place, our unshakable faith in the nobility of our profession and its place in the broader cultural life of the community, have been shaken by the incessant demands of modern academic life and its relentless culture of accountability and demand for "relevance"' (Lal 2017: 90). Shortly after his going into retirement, ANU's School of Culture, History and Language, where he had been based since the early 1990s, was 're-structured to the point of becoming unrecognisable'. Pacific Studies was

⁴ By coincidence Brij's 'Extinguished Lecture', which was delivered at the ANU on 2 February 2017, was published on 31 July 2017, the day before the launch of *Bearing Witness*.

bowdlerised and it distressed him to see retrenchments and, for the lucky one, the redeployments and the departures of valued former colleagues for greener pastures, if they were lucky. Again, what had taken so long to build up was dismantled at a moment's notice. The restructuring was described by an incredulous observer as 'unique for its severity, short-sightedness, and the damage it will do to Australia's well-earned reputation for excellence in studies of Asia and the Pacific' (Golub 2016; see also Haley 2016). It was 'a deeply saddening experience' for Brij, who made no bones that he 'felt lucky to be getting out when [he] did' (Lal 2017: 108). There is no turning back the clock but there are better ways of going about university governance.

It would be wrong end on a downbeat note, especially on a celebratory occasion. Honours have come Brij's way, including being admitted as a Member of the Order of Australia and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities; and now we have *Bearing Witness* as a tribute to his merit. My thanks go to all who made the volume possible as well as appreciation to all present on this occasion, who have come this evening to see Brij so honoured.

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