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Autobiography and Faction

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Brij Lal started his professional career as an historian, but from the mid-1990s he has become increasingly involved in autobiography and creative writing. He called the latter ‘faction’, which as the name suggests is a quasi-fictional genre that mixes fact with fiction. The impulse to writing in a less-academic mode stemmed indirectly from his love of good literature and good writing generally. The direct impulse was much earlier and dates from his postgraduate fieldwork in India in 1978, when he was aged 26. For almost six months he lived in the impoverished rural areas of northeast India that provided the bulk of the *girmitiyas* (Indian indentured labourers) to Fiji. On visiting his grandfather’s village, while keeping a diary, he went through a gamut of emotions that brought to the surface questions of identity and heritage, and he thought there and then that writing in a more creative vein might be the way to make better sense of such experiences (Lal 2003; Raicola 2007). But he did not know how to write in such a manner and neither did he have the time to learn. He explained to me, ‘I was climbing the academic ladder and had to pay my dues’.¹ Had he known about it, Brij would have been heartened by the autobiography of Alan Bullock, an historian for whom he has high regard. It contains the encouraging statement that Bullock’s father ‘did not share

1 Unattributed quotations are taken from interviews I conducted with Brij in 2000 and 2007. Some of the statements in the present chapter are drawn from Munro 2009: 243–309.

the view of many critics of his time that novels had an ephemeral character and did not deserve to be included in the discussion of serious literature' (Bullock 2000: 244).

Brij felt awkward about his literary aspirations; the closet novelist was seemingly on his way to becoming a novelist *manqué*. Although he hankered to write in a non-academic vein, he felt inhibited. Always a lover of good literature, Brij would have agreed with fellow historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, who told a friend, 'I have read no books ... only dry and dusty sixteenth-century leases and records of debt and bills and docquets of inconceivable philistinism. What a price one pays to write history! But I hope to get back to literature soon' (quoted in Worden 2015: 4). But academics are only supposed to read fiction, not to actually write it. What would people think if he did so? Then several things happened. The deaths of his mother (in 1981), his brother Ben (1992), which was a devastating person blow (Lal 2001: 139–52), and then his father (1996) made him realise that much was at risk of being lost if he did not recapture on paper some of their shared moments. There was a need to 'shore up fragments before they slipped away' and to preserve things for the future generation, including his own urbanised children, Yogi and Niraj, who were disconnected from their Indo-Fijian roots. Brij was also approaching middle age, when the shadow begins to lengthen: 'you become aware of the limited time you have, and you want to make sense of things' is how he described it to me. His first forays into non-academic writing were in the mid to late 1990s, and were written in longhand, as were his lectures and sometimes even conference papers (although nowadays his creative writing is typed onto a computer screen). His first effort at non-academic writing concerned his 1978 visit to Bahraich, his grandfather's village, when he was a PhD student. Then came 'Sunrise on the Ganga', which recounted his reactions to India 20 years later. He also wrote about his older brother, the result of which was 'Ben's Funeral'.² These were followed by 'Mr Tulsi's Store', about that perennial evil of Indo-Fiji rural life, the moneylender—perhaps the rough equivalent of ticket touts in England in terms of avariciousness.³

2 The latter two were initially published in Ganguly and Nandan 1998: 91–108; and National Federation Party 1997: 69–76, respectively.

3 Moneylenders and other wicked middlemen were an institutionalised part of agrarian life in India. They followed Indian indentured workers to their places of employment. See generally Catanach 1970 (the late Ian Catanach was one of Brij's PhD examiners).

Brij's training as an historian prompted the realisation that a pivotal period in Indo-Fijian rural life, the 1930s through to the 1960s, needed chronicling before it receded from memory and was overtaken by the forces of change:

It is an enormously important period in Indo-Fijian history. Indenture has ended, new cultural and social institutions were being set up, schools and newspapers were being established. This was a time when education was becoming important ... How did this community so near to the shadows of indenture create that type of world—village life, the ways in which they celebrated life, and mourned its passing, the ways in which they created voluntary associations of self help, the way they saw themselves as a people and their place in the larger scheme of things? I was part of that world of post-war village life: prehistoric, no running water, electricity or tar sealed roads, no telephones. I was part of that world for which there was no documentation. It was a very important part of our life and of Fijian history overall. But how do you write about that past when you don't have records and people's memories are fading and many of them are dead? (from Munro 2009: 286).

Writing about village life during his childhood presented unexpected difficulties because he had only his early memories upon which to draw, and yet he had to be truthful to lived experience. At the same time, he had to move beyond his familiar academic parameters. He was trying to write about the experience of a generation from memory—to capture the spirit of the age. Although he had to write *as* an historian, he could not write *like* an historian. As mentioned, his children's reactions impressed upon him the urgency of recreating on paper the lost world of his own childhood: they simply could not comprehend a universe so alien to them. Yogi had only lived in Fiji as a young child, almost entirely in Suva. Niraj, who was born in Hawai'i, had only spent brief periods in the country. In short, Brij aspired in his autobiographical and faction writing to 'connect today's disconnected and dispersed generation of Indo-Fijians with their historical and cultural roots' (Lal 2003: 46. See also Chand 2013; Sharma 2007). For comparisons, see historian James Walvin's autobiography of growing up in the Greater Manchester area in the 1940s and 1950s, which stresses how the present is different from even the recent past (Walvin 2014). In similar fashion, one of the reasons that Walvin wrote his autobiography stemmed from talking to his sons and grandson: 'they listen to my tales as if I were talking about a lost Amazonian tribe. It was utterly beyond their ken.'⁴

4 James Walvin, email to author, 26 November 2014.

'Mr Tulsi's Store', 'Return to Bahraich', 'Ben's Funeral' and 'Sunrise on the Ganga' were smuggled into *Chalo Jahagi* (2000), his collected essays on Indo-Fijian indenture. He was not laughed out of court on account of their inclusion, and it did announce his intention to go beyond strictly academic writing. It helped to discover that he had a collective of colleagues in the Coombs Building at The Australian National University (ANU) who enjoyed writing creatively and provided reassurance and encouragement (Lal 2011: 15): Tessa Morris-Suzuki had written children's stories and poems; Mark Elvin had written both poetry and fiction, including a trilogy under the pseudonym John Mark Dutton (Lal 2011: 132); William C. (Bill) Clarke was also writing poetry and facilitating the publication of poetry by Pacific Islanders; Donald Denoon was trying his hand at novels, freely admitting that his first efforts read like 'an interminable seminar' (Borrie 2004; Fuller 2001; Clark 2000; Denoon 1996); and Hank Nelson was also beginning to write creatively. Lal would have been further reassured had he realised that others associated with ANU had also published fiction—for example, the historian Manning Clark (1969, 1986).

Another boost was the formation, within the (then) Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies (RSPAS), of a publishing arm named Pandanus Books. Its managing editor, Ian Templeman, was himself a poet who wished to encourage creative writing. In 2000, Brij founded the journal *Conversations*, under the imprint of Pandanus Books, as an outlet for the creative endeavour of colleagues in RSPAS. Out of this confluence emerged his first faction book, *Mr Tulsi's Store* (2001). Published by Pandanus Press, and containing several chapters that were originally published in *Chalo Jahagi* and in *Conversations*, *Mr Tulsi's Store* made something of an impression; it was highly commended at the ACT Arts Council 'Notable Book of 2002' award, and in San Francisco was judged one of 10 'Notable Books of the Asia Pacific' in that year's Kiriya Prize.

Brij thought he was on to something new. He thought he had coined the word 'faction' (fact + fiction = faction) and had no idea that faction was an established literary style, although the term was late in finding its way into the major reference books (e.g. Drabble 1995: 341; see also Stead 2008: 306n). He was very surprised to learn, for example, that many writers during the 1930s were writing in an 'ambiguous, first-person descriptive vein, a then fashionable genre which blurred any clear line between fiction and autobiography—truthful to experience but not necessarily to fact (Crick 1971: 96n). Another example of faction that approximates

the matter and substance of Brij's faction is Eric Braithwaite's *The Night we Stole the Mountie's Car* (1971), whose discrete stories are set on the Canadian prairies during the 1930s.

There is also a seemingly identical genre that rejoices under the name *roman à clef* (literally, novel with a key), the invention of which was attributed to Madeleine de Scudery (1607–1701), 'who created it to disguise from the general reader the public figures whose political actions and ideas formed the basis of her fictional narratives' (Boyde 1999: 155). In that sense, faction has been around for a long time.

The actual word 'faction' is of much more recent origin. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the term back to 1967 and even now it is hardly a household word. And neither is it 'a particularly helpful term. Most novels, if one were so inclined, could be described as factions: only works of fantasy would seem to be excluded' (Riemer 1996: 65). It stands to reason that the routine disclaimer in so many novels that resemblance to any person, living or dead, is transparently disingenuous. Nonetheless, in Brij's case, his use of the term is a remarkable example of someone replicating an existing genre, down to the very name, without realising its existence.

To complicate matters, it was not clear what Brij actually meant by faction. In a rare moment of ambiguity he wrote:

In recording my experiences, I have privileged truth over accuracy, attempting to catch the thoughts and emotions rather than dry facts about village life. For obvious reason, some names have had to be changed and some conversations imagined. I have tried to recall the past creatively, imaginatively, rendering factual, lived experience through the prism of semi-fiction. I call this kind of exercise 'faction' writing. It is the most satisfactory way I know of remembering a past unrecorded by written events (Lal 2001: x).

It is the phrase 'to recall the past creatively, imaginatively, rendering factual, lived experience through the prism of semi-fiction' that confuses in the context of *Mr Tulsi's Store*. Most of the chapters in the book are not faction at all. They are autobiography. Brij at that time was conflating faction and autobiography and lumping the two under the rubric creative writing. Only two of the book's 12 chapters are outright faction, namely 'Mr Tulsi's Store' (where an avaricious moneylender gets his comeuppance) and 'Kismet' (where a newly appointed secondary school

teacher falls for one of his students). Degrees of licence are exercised in these two chapters: names are changed, conversations are invented or reconstructed, events and episodes extraneous to 'what actually happened' may be pressed into service. But the inner kernel of such recounting is written as he observed or was told. Whatever the extent of literary licence, they are about, or based upon, real people, actual events and lived experience. The autobiographical chapters, by contrast, are as accurate to fact as he can make them.

Autobiography

Brij has no desire to publish a full-scale autobiography. Instead, there is a dispersed and extensive corpus of autobiographical writings whose content is both professional and personal, with the proviso that his nuclear family is largely off limits, the major exception being the account of his family accompanying him to the ancestral village (Lal 2001: 127–38). This, in fact, was the experience that inspired him to actually start writing fiction.⁵ Take the autobiographical chapters in *Mr Tulsi's Store* (2001). The contents cover a broad spectrum and involve episodes as varied as village life during his childhood, his secondary schooling, his undergraduate years at the University of the South Pacific (USP), the fieldtrip to northeast India, his employment at the University of Hawai'i, and his involvement in Fiji politics, whether as constitutional adviser, a chronicler of elections, or as a commentator on political proceedings.

The opening chapter in *Mr Tulsi's Store* is 'Tabia', his home village close by Labasa (Lal 2001: 1–23). It provides necessary context for what follows by explaining the institutions and dynamics and a village life based around sugar cane production and community inaction. It also foreshadows a dominant theme in the chapters that follow—namely, the value placed on formal education and his immersion in it. He had illiterate grandparents and parents; his mother learned enough of the alphabet to scribble her name in Hindi, but that was the extent of her literacy. Brij was the second boy from Tabia to go to university and he is under no illusions about how it boiled down to sheer chance of having the benefit of inspired and accomplished teachers. In the words of historian

5 The contradiction remains that many academics attach great importance to family yet largely exclude it from their memoirs and concentrate instead on their professional life. See, for example, Mansfield 2012.

Patrick Collinson, 'I know of no autobiography or memoir by a historian which does not attribute his or her commitment to the subject to some gifted teacher' (Collinson 2011: 47), and so it was with Brij. As he relates in 'Labasa Secondary' (Lal 2001: 59–80), they introduced him to good literature, which he soaked up like a sponge. Elsewhere Brij has remarked:

I belong to a tradition and a generation which does not regard a few lines of mangled English as poetry. Grammatically incorrect 'English' that passes for modish prose is, for me, an exercise in language abuse. William Shakespeare, Matthew Arnold and John Steinbeck are not, for me, Dead White Males whose works have no relevance. I read them with the same devotion and interest as I read Albert Wendt and MG Vassanji, Chinua Achebe and Prem Chand. And great poetry often provides deeper insights into the human condition than post-modern theory: TS Eliot and Stanley Merwyn are good examples (Lal 2007a: 199).

His teachers were nothing if not adventurous. One of them was Vijay Mishra, now a professor of English literature at Murdoch University in Western Australia. He introduced his brighter students to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, for which he 'would have been lynched at Mahatma Gandhi High!' (Lal 2001: 71).⁶ Another teacher was Krishna Datt, later a Labour parliamentarian, who taught history with an 'infectious enthusiasm':

He opened up his own personal library to us, lending us books by Geoffrey Barraclough, Denis Mack Smith, Percival Spear, L.C.B. Seaman, A.J.P. Taylor. I am not sure we understood the complex arguments and themes these historians espoused, but that was not the point. The books opened up a window to a past—even if that past was remote to all of us—that connected us to a wider world, other human experiences in history. The process of learning, I suppose, was more important than the content. Krishna also had a marvellous sense of theatre. I vividly recall him turning up to class one morning with a large placard around his neck with the opening words of the *Communist Manifesto*, 'Workers of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains.' And he created a minor furore in the school by suggesting that Hitler's birthday should be remembered because he was an important—evil but important—figure in 20th century history (Lal 2001: 75).

6 A little over a decade later, Brij wrote a chapter for a collection edited by Mishra (Lal 1979: 12–39), who by then was a university lecturer. Walvin (2014: 58–59) discusses the court case in England over allowing the sale of the unexpurgated version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, commenting that when he read the book as a 19-year-old he could not see what the fuss had been about.

A third outstanding teacher was Subramani, who took over from Mishra and who became Fiji's finest writer of fiction and professor of English at the University of the South Pacific. *Dauka Puran*, set in central Vanua Levu during the mid-twentieth century, is the longest novel written in Fiji Hindi (Subramani 2001).

A criticism of educational practice in the colonial Pacific has focused on the overtly Anglocentric outlook of the curriculum. School children sang 'Bobby Shafto' and 'Sussex by the Sea' rather than songs in their own language. School textbooks, whether history, geography or English, were equally bereft of local content (see Lal 2004: 239–49). There is some validity to such criticisms. Or to put it another way, there is nothing wrong with gaining, through books, 'a little of that wisdom which Ulysses gained through knowing many cities and many men's manners and customs' (Spate 2006: 33), but not to the exclusion of one's own country or locality.⁷ Brij is remarkably unconcerned about such qualms (Lal 2011: 191–92), feeling instead that the set reading, and especially the English and European classics, 'opened up new horizons beyond our joyless villages and fed our imagination, inculcating a love for the written word' (Lal 2001: 71): Elsewhere he has written:

Reading stories from the Caribbean or Africa in our remote rural school, we felt connected to other parts of the world. The stories and pictures opened up new horizons for us, helped us momentarily escape the mindless routine of village life. That in its own way was also an empowering, enlarging experience. We understood that bad as things were around us and for us, we were not alone in our miseries and predicaments. The need to know, to connect with the world around us has remained with me. The passion to know more has only intensified with time (Lal 2011: 3).

Brij has few regrets about his time at Labasa Secondary School. It was there that the enjoyment of reading was inculcated, but it:

had to be cultivated, which was never easy for people coming from non-literate, oral cultures. Now reading is an integral part of my being, indispensable to sanity. For me, most knowledge still comes through the written text, not the latest technology (Lal 2011: 212).

⁷ The *New Zealand School Journal* for primary school students achieved a nice balance between overseas and local topics, but with the aid of human and financial resources unavailable in Fiji. See O'Brien 2007. For a discussion of criticisms of the Eurocentric curricula, see Partington 2015: 255–57.

It appals him that Fiji has no reading culture to speak of. His secondary school education also showed that there were alternatives to the 'intellectual and cultural isolation' that was part and parcel of the 'mentally deadening routine of village life' (Lal 2001: 79–80). It also provided the escape route from the thatched-roof huts, the cane fields and the narrow mindset of Tabai. With the aid of the Canadian Third World Scholarship, he secured a place at the recently established University of the South Pacific and fled the dead hand of village life.

Brij's increasing detachment from his roots is by no means an isolated case. From at least the late 1950s, British working-class boys (and sometimes girls) were able to embark on university studies as recipients of state scholarships. Victor Bailey, who is now a history professor at the University of Kansas, was the first person in his extended family to go to university, in the mid-1960s, and he too would probably have never aspired to a university admission without the blessing and encouragement of good school teachers. In terms that largely replicate Brij's experience, Bailey notes:

the tendency for the entire University experience to take you away from your home background. The demand to think critically and widely can only lead to some element of alienation. You return to your old stamping ground with a different outlook. The old terrain feels horribly claustrophobic, terribly conformist. You can't imagine ever living and working in those environs again. In my case, there is also the accent issue. After a few years in different settings, the Yorkshire accent tends to soften and you begin to sound 'posh' to the ears of family and friends, as if you are sedulously trying to distance yourself from the old ways. And of course you return with a different set of political positions, which sound daft and idealistic to your erstwhile friends.⁸

In a somewhat similar fashion, Peter Corris (an historian of the Pacific Islands labour trade) used his education at the University of Melbourne as the vehicle by which he could 'get well clear of the a caring but stultifying, secular but puritanical, working-class upbringing', as well as to acquire a wider outlook on the world (Corris 2007: 62).

⁸ Victor Bailey, email to author, 28 March 2015; see also Walvin 2014: 195–202; LaMahieu 2014. With Brij, it was not a matter of accent but, rather, his facility in Hindi becoming somewhat rusty through lack of practice (Lal 2011: 197–98). Again by contrast, Brij notes how few people of Indian heritage in Trinidad can now speak in Hindi at all (Lal 2011: 152).

Brij's time at USP is recounted in 'From Labasa to Laucala Bay' (Lal 2001: 81–103). Again, he had marvellous teachers but more than hints at the tribal nature of the student body in a regional university that was supposed to transcend matters of race and nationality. At one point, in a passage that bespeaks the later Lal, he expresses regrets over this very point:

to our great shame, we derided Indo-Fijian students such as Robin Singh who wore the sulu, spoke Fijian and preferred Fijian over Indian food, as social misfits not worthy of our affection and company. In retrospect, not getting to know Fijian students better, understanding their fears and hopes, I count as a sad missed opportunity (Lal 2001: 90).

Brij's intention was to qualify as a high school English teacher, but the prospect of a mandatory course in transformational grammar deterred him from pursuing his romantic interest in the novels of the Brontë sisters. So he switched to history. A major influence was the activist historian Walter Johnson from the University of Hawai'i, who was teaching at USP for a semester. He knew the people he lectured about—Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Adlai Stevenson, Martin Luther King—and he taught things in which he had participated, such as the Civil Rights Movement. As well as being a productive scholar, he had been the co-chair of the Draft Adlai Stevenson campaign, and had Stevenson won, Johnson would have been in the White House, as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr was during John F. Kennedy's tenure. Johnson's example reinforced the notion that USP had a practical mission to provide a trained workforce for the decolonising Pacific (Lal 2001: 96). The intellectual climate at USP at that point was critical to Lal's evolution as an historian engaged in practical issues of the day.

Brij's marks were good enough to enable him to pursue postgraduate study at metropolitan universities but he has little to say about getting his MA and PhD from the University of British Columbia and The Australian National University, respectively. He returned to USP as a teaching staff member in 1981, and then he moved to the University of Hawai'i in 1983 (Lal 2001: 111–26). Given the politicised atmosphere, he is convinced that he would have been 'a part-time academic dabbling full-time in politics' had he remained in Fiji (Lal 2001: 102). He has a point but I think he is being too hard on himself here; his productivity would have declined but he would still have published a respectable academic corpus. He made his mark at the University of Hawai'i as both a teacher and a scholar and he freely admits that he was driven, in part, by a fear

of failure. He is the first to admit that he had opportunities in Hawai'i that would never have been available at USP, but these had to be grasped. In the sterner—yet paradoxically more encouraging—environment of Hawai'i, he was able to achieve goals that would have been out of reach in USP's environment of complacency and underachievement. Brij was rather amused when I grimly described USP as a halfway house between a protection racket and a sheltered workshop. He later penned the lament that his *alma mater* had reneged on its obligation 'to produce [the] enduring, fundamental scholarship which [it] was so centrally located to produce ... So much potential, so little of it realized' (Lal 2001: 102–03). As he said more diplomatically on a subsequent occasion, despite the implied criticism of USP's insularity,

We must continue to publish research that adds a vital sentence to the larger global conversation of scholarship ... We must engage and sensitively with the outside world, breaking the mould of self-referential, 'ghettoising,' inward looking academia (Lal 2011: 126).

Hawai'i, however, had its own dissatisfactions, one of them being the visa problems that prevented Brij's wife, Dr Padma Narsey Lal, gaining permanent employment in her field of resource and environmental biology. What he doesn't say is that local attitudes toward the situation in post-coup Fiji, especially from the Hawaiian sovereignty movement but not confined to it, disturbed him. There was widespread sympathy for Fijians as *iTaukei* (people of the land); the perception was that the 1987 coups were legitimate and justified given that indigenous Fijians had been hard done by. Events in Fiji were seen through the prism of the Hawaiian experience of dispossession. There was a reluctance on the part of many Hawaiians to believe what he was saying—that the coups were about power—and some students in his Honours courses wished they had a Rabuka in Hawai'i (Munro 2009: 261). There was also the feeling on Brij's part that this outpost within the United States was too much a foreign country. When a job offer came from the ANU, he accepted with alacrity.

Brij's autobiographical writings provide insights into his educational experiences and his professional career at the level of influences, satisfactions and motivations. There is the enquiring mind, the driven scholar, the need for engagement with his subject and the world at large, the love of good literature. The latter, in turn, has resulted in Brij writing both his histories and his factions with an eye to a broader lay audience

rather than ‘for a like-minded, narrowly-focused fraternity of specialists’ (Lal 2011: 4). On a personal note, it is entirely in character that my 2009 Christmas present from Brij and Padma was a book subtitled *Adventures in the World of Books* (Carr 2008).

Presented as piecemeal contributions, his self-accounts are discontinuous and partial. They taper off when he returns to the ANU in 1990 and some important episodes are omitted. They are not evasions, it’s just how it happened; and he has written more autobiography than any other historian of the Pacific Islands, barring Robert Langdon (1995). Even when trying to avoid imposing one’s own expectations, there is still regret, for example, that he does not mention the extent to which the research and writing of *Broken Waves* (1992), which several contributors to this volume mention appreciatively, exhausted him and disrupted other schedules. There is also a silence about the protracted business of disengaging from the University of Hawai‘i, and the occasion when he (temporarily) lost one half of his job at the ANU, until the intervention of a concerned administrator (see Munro 2009: 262, 281). The same selectivity applies to his work as one of the three Constitution Reform Commissioners in 1996–97 (Lal 2001: 153–68). He reveals some of the public face of the Commission and especially the dynamics of receiving submissions around the country, but little of its private workings. The reason is that he was sworn to secrecy.

What he does make clear is the depth of his affection and regard for another of the three-man Commission, the late Tomasi Vakatora, who was not one to be trifled with. As Brij recalls, the first meeting of the Commission ‘was a pleasant enough encounter. “See, there is no blood on the flour, Tom,” I said, pleased at the way things had gone. Back came the immediate reply: “Not yet”. “What had I let myself into,” I say to myself’ (Lal 2001: 167; 1998: 174). Vakatora had a reputation as a hard-line ethnonationalist. Coming from opposite ends of the political spectrum, he and Brij seemed the antithesis of one other. Yet they confounded the sceptics in striking up a strong working relationship (and an enduring friendship) because each shared a vision for a more inclusive and less racially motivated Fiji. It might have helped, too, that each came from a humble background, in Vakatora’s case from the mangrove swamps of the Rewa Delta (Vakatora 1988). It was a remarkable relationship that recalls the meeting of minds between the German Stresemann and the Frenchman Briand, who put aside national differences in the greater cause of lasting peace in Europe during the 1920s (Wiskeman 1966: 60–62).

But, as in Europe, it was not to be. The work of the Commission was undone, first by key recommendations being watered down by the Joint Parliamentary Select Committee, and second by the 2000 coup.

In describing his outlook as an historian, Brij makes clear that he needs a sense of engagement with his subject—the heart and the head must come together, which helps explain why the grandson of the *girmitiya* would write about the indenture experience in Fiji. A similar engagement, along with a sense of moral responsibility, accounts for his forays into the contemporary historiography of Fiji. He was initially disturbed that a democratically elected government was overthrown, in 1987, by those unable to surrender their power and perquisites at the behest of the ballot box; in more recent years he is disturbed by human rights violations by a government determined to quell dissident voices. As he has written:

I live at the interface of scholarship and practical engagement with society. I am what the French might call *spectateur engage*, a politically engaged but independent intellectual (although intellectual is not a label I am comfortable with). I take my rights, roles and responsibilities as a citizen seriously. I live in society, not above or outside it. I am part of the history about which I write. I write to communicate, not obfuscate, to be read rather than simply to get ahead. I would like to have my voice heard on matters of consequence, to make a difference, if I can. Writing as accessibly as I can is my private act of resistance and revenge against some of the dominant intellectual fashions of our time (Lal 2011: 4).

There is the widespread feeling that writing about the very recent past is perilous. The familiar canards are lack of perspective, intrusion of personal feelings, loss of objectivity and the unavailability of sources. Brij has no truck with these criticisms and he has put up a reasoned defence of his position (Lal 2011: 39–57), arguing that the genre need not be one whit inferior to histories of the more distant past (see Munro, ‘Indenture and Contemporary Fiji’, this volume).

It is also the case that Brij’s intellectual upbringing—for example, the influence of Walter Johnson (Munro 2009: 246–47)—made him receptive to writing contemporary history and to commenting upon current affairs. There is a tradition of ‘participant history’ among Pacific historians that commenced in the late 1940s with J.W. Davidson’s involvement in the moves towards self-government in Western Samoan (Munro 2001: 91–116; Hempenstall 2007). Does Brij write ‘better’ history as a result of his engagement and participation? Ultimately, in my view, it boils down

to personal preference, and Brij is happier when patrolling the borders of scholarship and practical action, as opposed to the likes of the historian of Tudor and Stuart England J.H. Hexter, who live their affective lives in another time and another place (Hexter 1961: 6–9), arguing that historians should be immersed in the archival material of their period and stay well away from the passions of their day and age. Brij begs to differ with such a hands-off approach: ‘There is an unmatched excitement about doing contemporary history’ (Lal 2011: 57). In other words, it is a matter of temperament, and I tend to agree with historian Michael Kammen that there is ‘not the slightest correlation between involvement and detachment on the one hand and the quality of a historian’s work on the other’ (Kammen 1982: 15). It’s not a matter of the intrinsic superiority of one over the other. Rather, it boils down to what one wants to do and can do best. Brij is not in the least worried that the various instant histories of the 1987 coups vary one from the other. There is no single definitive text, he says, no master narrative:

The idea that one day when all the facts are available, when the first primitive drafts of contemporary, or eye witness history, will be transformed by a master historian into a standard, universally uncontested account, about the full significance of what happened in the past, is mere fantasy (Lal 2011: 44–45).

As a public intellectual, Brij feels that silence is not an option. Rather he is duty-bound to speak truth to power, and Brij is fond of quoting Schlesinger that: ‘A society in which citizens cannot criticize the policy of the state is a society without the means of correcting its course’ (Lal 2011: 5, 138, 305). For his pains he (and Padma) have been banned from re-entering Fiji (Lal 2011: 303–306). In November 2009, after giving a radio interview, he was taken to the military barracks, aggressively ‘interviewed’, roughed up, and told he had 24 hours to leave the country. In January 2010, Padma, who had never publicly expressed a political opinion, was detained at the Nadi International Airport, incarcerated in a guarded hotel room and put on the first plane to Australia the next day. At the time, she was a senior research adviser to IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature). Padma was then barred from re-entering Fiji, simply for the ‘sin’ of being Brij’s spouse. In an act of sheer vindictiveness, the Fiji authorities won’t even allow her to transit through Fiji, which has impacted on her career as an environmental consultant in the Pacific Islands.

Brij is not the only eminent academic to have been deported from one or other part of the world. In 1963 the young Terence Ranger, a lecturer at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, had his movements restricted and was then given his marching orders from Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) for his advocacy of racial equality and support for African nationalism (Ranger 2013: 127–48). And Benedict Anderson was banned from Indonesia in 1972 for his criticisms of the Suharto regime and only allowed to return in 1998 (Anderson 2016: 89). In neither case did the prohibitions have serious repercussions; Ranger and Anderson simply shifted their research interests to other parts of East Africa and Southeast Asia, respectively. Anderson considers himself lucky to have been kicked out of Indonesia because it forced him to do fieldwork elsewhere, to get away from a ‘one-country perspective’, and he had the linguistic skills to engage in fieldwork in both Thailand and the Philippines. There was an unintended bonus: ‘Had I not been expelled, it is unlikely that I would have written *Imagined Communities*’, the book for which he is most famous (Anderson 2016: 55). In Brij’s case, exclusion from Fiji would have been serious had it come at an earlier juncture in his career, given that he never wanted to specialise in a different island group. It is fortunate that the ban was only a few years away from formal retirement.

Brij also got more excitement than he bargained for when writing a biography of Jai Ram Reddy, whose three-decade political career in Fiji was on the opposition benches. In an intriguing essay (Lal 2015: 59–72), Brij relates the ‘making’ of the biography and the extent to which Reddy was involved; the latter was cooperative in providing documentation and freely discussed most issues but otherwise maintained an arm’s-length stance.⁹ Brij also reveals his difficulties with the project, some of them due to a rare case of writer’s block in initially putting pen to paper. Another problem was Reddy himself, who demurred when he read a completed draft, on the grounds that, ‘There are too many things here that will unnecessarily upset too many people. I have finished my career and I want to be left alone in peace’ (Lal 2015: 68). Compromises were reached, but not without heartache and tension, and publication eventually went ahead. In the final paragraphs of his essay, Brij reveals himself in searing terms, with his own three decades of anguish tumbling into the open:

9 See also Morgan (2015: 131–52) for the more positive reflections of a biographer who has also dealt with living subjects, in his case the British politicians James Callaghan (1912–2005) and Michael Foot (1913–2010).

I relived the tumultuous events of the post-independence years that I had witnessed as a bystander: the pettiness of political leaders, corrupt and self-serving; the rampant racism; the arrogance of power; the coups and chaos; the fractured hopes and betrayal of promises; and the struggle of one man, not perfect by any means, hobbled by bitter divisions among his own people and facing the wrath of men convinced of their God-given right to rule irrespective of the verdict of the ballot box; the struggle by one man to find an honourable middle course for his people and for his country. All that sacrifice, all that anguish and heartache, came to nought in the end. To relive all this was a deeply painful experience for Reddy, as it was for me. I know in my heart that I would not be able to write this book now; the grief is simply overwhelming at how we ended up where we are: in a cul-de-sac where the prospects of genuine democracy look exceedingly bleak, where guns, not good arguments, rule the day (Lal 2015: 73–74).

Brij's feelings could be summed up in the words that his friend Vincent O'Sullivan used in another context: '[There is] a difference between the silence after the music, and the silence when there is no more music' (O'Sullivan 2003: 165).

His more recent autobiographical writings have become ever more reflective and sombre, revealing more of the so-called 'inner man'. It came as a complete surprise to read about his sadness that he cannot share with his Australian friends, unless they happen to be Hindu, his religious and cultural heritage: 'My inner world remains a mystery to them. I regret very much not being able to share my cultural life more fully, more meaningfully, with people whose friendship I genuinely value' (Lal 2008: 213). Longstanding friends had no idea that he felt this way. Conversely, when he was still allowed to enter Fiji, Brij found it difficult to connect with younger Indo-Fijians and to village life generally. Escaping his poor rural background carries unexpected penalties, which others seldom realise.

Also, in what might serve as a 'signing off' essay ('Coombs 4240: a room of my own'), Brij speaks of his 25 years in his office at the ANU, his home away from home with which he has deep communion. It recalls Kipling's poem *Sussex*:

God gave all men all earth to love
But, since our hearts are small,
Ordained to each one spot should prove
Beloved over all.

This fabled space had character all of its own—festooned with posters and photographs, crowded out by bookshelves, a littered desk where Brij could still find anything (except people's addresses). It was where he did most of his writing. 'Coombs 4240' also contains reflections on the changes to university life since he started out. He does not like what he has seen and experienced and he registers a firm and heartfelt protest at the consequences of the corporate/management model of university governance (Lal 2011: 127–38). He is dismayed by the supine response from the academy: 'The troubling thing is how meekly academics have capitulated to such pressure. By our acquiescence we have been complicit in the making of the mess that confronts us today' (Lal 2011: 136). Neither is Brij at ease with the new regime governing PhD supervision, which he feels involves too much bureaucracy and handholding. He likes even less the bean counting when it comes to assessing academic writing and how this prioritises productivity over creativity.

Another 'signing off' essay is 'When it is over' (Lal 2011: 1–7), which also serves as an *apologia pro mea sua*. Here, he expresses his discomfort that 'the narcissism of the younger generation [of Pacific historians] sometimes erases the historical subject itself ... It is for me too late to change. Nor, if truth be told, would I want to' (Lal 2011: 5, 134–35). Like myself, he is happy being the type of historian he is. We have no desire to being other than what we are.

It's a good time to be going into retirement, especially when Brij's own part of the ANU, the School of Culture, History and Language, has been comprehensively gutted in yet another restructuring. But the real significance of 'When it is over' is to reveal what lies behind his work ethic, his commitment to his craft and, indeed, what impels him to further exertions when he has already done enough. He once said to me, 'I'd be enormously dissatisfied if I didn't accomplish what I set out to do'. It explains why he is so taken by Mary Oliver's poem 'When death comes', which reads in part, 'When it's over, I don't want to wonder whether I have made of my life something particular, and real ... / I don't want to end up simply by having visited this earth' (Oliver 1992: 10–11, quoted in Lal 2011: 1)

Faction

Brij's faction stories are concerned one way or another with the Indo-Fijian, whether at home or abroad. These texts get beneath the surface appearances to the internal dynamics—the egos, the stresses and strains of relationships, patterns of conflict and power, defining the rules of the game. There is no nostalgia when it comes to village life: the irony is that Brij sets out to recapture a world he is glad to have escaped. That world is portrayed as containing little joy and much sadness as people cope with the hardships of daily life, the pervasive turmoil of personal relationships and the frequent enough injustices of social interactions. Some may find it strange that Brij finds creative writing far more difficult than writing scholarly history. The New Zealand historian and novelist Ann Beaglehole finds creative writing easier because there are no footnotes, and neither is there the endless checking and verification of text and footnotes alike.¹⁰ Brij, by contrast, finds having to conjure up his own storyline far more taxing and burdensome.

The best-known of his faction stories is 'Mr Tulsi's Store' (Lal 2001: 45–57). More precisely, Mr Tulsi was the moneylender at Brij's home village of Tabia and the story revolves around Brij's own family. The two brothers at loggerheads are his father and uncle, and the father never forgave being betrayed by his sibling. In 'Kismet' (Lal 2001: 185–205), Brij rather regrets deploying the first person because people jump to the conclusion that the story is about himself, when in fact it is about one of his school teachers. But events similar to those described did happen; there *was* the romantic entanglement between teacher and schoolgirl, and the two *were* of different faiths. 'Mr Tulsi's Store' and 'Kismet' stray from strict factuality. But they are as true to experience and lived emotions as Brij can make them, and they recall J.B. Priestley's comment on the television series *Hancock's Half Hour*—that every episode 'told us more about the human condition, more about the failure of 1950s society, than 100 student demonstrations' (quoted in Goodwin 1999: 222). Or as historian Max Beloff has said:

Sometimes I think the novelist may be a better guide to what we need to know and understand. Trollope's political novels are worth innumerable academic theses about nineteenth-century politics; Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*

¹⁰ Ann Beaglehole, telephone discussion with author, 27 November 2016. See also 'Beaglehole, Ann', n.d. *New Zealand Book Council Te Kaunihera Pukapuka o Aotearoa*.

is more illuminating than anything else that has been written about the 'transfer of power' in India. Historians do a more mundane job and are perhaps rightly less well regarded and less well rewarded (Beloff 1992: 24).

All the same, there is a credibility gap with 'Kismet', which occurred within a watching and a gossiping society. It is most unlikely that such an affair could have gone on for so long before being discovered. Or at least that is my perception, whereas Brij, not at all defensively, assures me that I would be surprised at how many secrets *do* remain hidden in small communities.

Brij's latest faction book is entitled *Turnings* (2008) and one of those 'turnings' refers to the crossroads in his career when he was combining writing conventional history and faction. Being freed from the shackles of the eternal footnote has an appeal, yet Lal constantly reminds that he writes faction as a historian:

I revisit the village but with a historian's mindset, disciplined imagination: you say 'I am on trial, I am on oath to tell the truth'. So in what I describe I try to capture the inner truth of that experience' (quoted in Athique 2006: 213, 330–31).

Thus, 'Marriage' (Lal 2008: 35–51) graphically relates the frictions that can occur when the bride moves in with her husband's family. Again, the family involved was Brij's. In 'Across the Fence' (Lal 2008: 71–94), Gita gets a sweet taste of what life is like on the outside but has to return to the drudgery of looking after a small shop and an unappreciative invalid husband. In 'The Dux of Naisinu' (Lal 2008: 13–33), the impossibly idealistic school teacher gets unjustly caught up in the local rumour mill and is professionally ruined. In 'In Mr Tom's Country' there is an overtly political message. Mr Tom, a former Colonial Sugar Refinery inspector, is outraged at the treatment of Indo-Fijians, who are the economic backbone of the country: 'You take them out and the whole place will fall apart. Just like that. What wrong have they done? How have they wronged the Fijian people? Their only vices are thrift and industry' (Lal 2008: 147). This is Brij's one faction story where the main character is not in Indo-Fijian.

Brij's faction broadly follows the trajectory of his writings on Indo-Fijian indenture, and indeed the broad contours of his own life. His stories have increasingly moved away from the village setting, a function of Brij increasingly feeling out of place when visiting Tabia. Moreover, the actual

themes in his indenture writings—of qualified survival and enforced adaptation (not necessarily for the better)—recur in his faction writing. And just as Brij has written scholarly articles about Indian indenture in sugar colonies besides Fiji (e.g. Lal 1998, 2000: 41–66), as well as second wave of migrations (Lal 2011: 139–55), his faction has chased the later diaspora (or second migration) of expatriate Indo-Fijians adjusting to their new places of abode.

The transmigrations following the 1987 and 2000 coups and the compromises of relocation are the stuff of his later faction stories. A notable example is ‘An Australian Fusion’ (Lal 2008: 173–95), which explores the recurring tensions between the older generation trying to hold onto the values of their homeland and a younger generation embracing the norms of the host society. Ramesh is set in his ways and secure in his cultural values, and has enormous difficulty in reconciling to the fact that his daughter is becoming Australianised and spurning her Indian heritage, which she thinks is a sham in any case. He eventually recognises that he has to make adjustments or else he will ruin his marriage and tear his family apart. That particular story is too close to the bone for some Indo-Australian youngsters—and their parents—let it be said. Perhaps, then, faction writing and conventional history have more similarities than differences in that their central concern is to get to the heart of the human experience.¹¹ Brij feels that his faction stories will stand or fall by the quality of the writing, how far they plausibly evoke a past time and the extent to which they plausibly express moments of action and passion.

Denouement

There is a synergy between Brij’s faction writing and his writing of conventional history; he writes his faction with the mindset of an historian but one freed from the fetters of the eternal footnote. There is another way of looking at it in the sense that his faction represents a return to his roots in English literature. He had initially intended to major in English language and literature at USP but was repelled by a course in transformational grammar and turned to history instead (Lal 1992: 245). This was the first of his several ‘turnings’. His computer-based PhD thesis on the origins of the Fiji Indians represents another bend in the road, and such work

11 Another tale of compromise and adjustment is recounted in ‘Kumkum: Maya’s story’ (Lal 2007b: 309–27).

was certainly out of character with his inclinations: 'It was a PhD. It had to be done' is how he matter-of-factly described the situation to me. It comes as no surprise that he was only too glad to escape the world of quantification at the first opportunity and return to the documentary and humanistic history with which he was more comfortable. In the same way, he familiarised himself with comparative electoral systems, not for its own sake or as a matter of abiding interest but because it was necessary to his constitutional advising (Lal 1997: 39–72). Again, he opted out of this line of country when the need passed. Another bend in the road was, from the early 1980s, branching out into contemporary history—and this before the 1987 coups that were instrumental in the 'contemporary turn' in Pacific Islands historiography. When he turned to faction in the late '90s, it was not a digression but, rather, closing the circle and returning to what he started off doing.

James Walvin's autobiography of childhood and adolescence has already been referred to. Like Brij, Walvin grew up in straightened circumstances—a working-class background in the Great Manchester area—and he too received a university education only by virtue of a competitive scholarship. Walvin's maternal grandfather said to him in his inimitably blunt style, 'You're a lucky bugger' (Walvin 2014: 202). And so is Brij fortunate to have coincided with a window of opportunity that enabled kids from poor families to go to university on scholarships. But they still had to work for it.

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