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Meetings with the Three Lals: That's Brij Lal, Professor Lal and Brij V. Lal

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I first met Brij Lal, the persona, in a book: his 1997 life of A.D. Patel. At the time I was in the first year of my PhD studies at The Australian National University (ANU), struggling with all manner of questions. Some of these were bound up in the mechanics of thesis writing—design, method, significance—but little questions beget bigger ones and so I was also searching for answers to life's great puzzles. I'm not sure I found many, but a PhD does force you to resolve to tackle such challenges in a certain way and thus to tacitly accept some well-worn intellectual values and beliefs. This is a pragmatic step as much as anything—a PhD cannot cover everything, not much at all really—and so, I was coming to learn, that to embark on telling a microstory requires borrowing some of the scaffolding from elsewhere, even if you intend to interrogate this at a later date.

For the PhD I was interested in political leadership, and, so, in addition to reading biographies and autobiographies of Pacific leaders, I was attempting to digest the literature on leadership, politics and democracy in the Pacific Islands. I was conflicted. I am a sceptic of donor efforts to promulgate 'good governance' around the world, and yet, despite my persistent reservations, I remain a democrat. At least, I was coming to realise this when I first met Brij Lal.

The Patel biography has many interesting and important themes but, in that moment, the one that resonated most was the uncompromising prosecution of a case that A.D. Patel, and through him Brij Lal, made for ‘one vote, one value’. The phrase, so often repeated as to appear a meaningless trope, captures a powerful imagining of how the world could and should be, the radicalism of which is born out in the Gandhi-inspired vision that A.D. had for Fiji. Inevitably, practice falls short of the ideal, and the public lives of both Brij and A.D. are testament to the messy and unpredictable way human affairs, under any regime, are governed. The irony of this vision being achieved in Fiji by non-democratic means would be painfully apparent to both men. Nevertheless, the sentiment retains romantic value for me and influenced how my PhD took shape. Put simply, I began to put aside perennial questions about whether democracy was appropriate in a Pacific context, and started to think about the *people*, like A.D., who practised it. The link, for me, was the realisation that if I believed in democracy, with all its imperfections, then the PhD didn’t have to (re)resolve questions about its appropriateness. I had decided where I stood and as a result was free to roam on the assumption that this form of government represents a good in its own right. Indeed, at times, to echo Bernard Crick (2000 [1962]), democracy might even require us to take up our pen in its defence.

Later in 2010, I met Brij Lal in person after attending a guest lecture he gave in a course on Pacific history. I was trying to track down the autobiographies and biographies of Pacific leaders and cornered him to seek his assistance. I don’t recall much of the conversation—no doubt he was helpful—but I do remember his clothes. He wore a bula shirt—not a luridly colourful one but it carried the unmistakable pattern—dress pants and an Australian-style bush hat. At first glance, it struck me as an odd combination. On reflection, it still is, but perhaps it is also an apt ensemble that reflects both his personal history, his inherent pragmatism—it was a warm day—and his capacity to stand out in a crowd. Certainly, it told me something about his jovial character that I had not picked up from the book.

I next met Brij Lal later that year, this time via email. I had just finished reading his 2010 biography of Jai Ram Reddy and had decided to review it (it later became the first piece of writing I published in an academic journal). I sent the review to my then supervisor—Peter Larmour—for his comment and advice about where to publish it. He suggested that, once accepted, I ought to send it on to Brij. In the fullness of time, when

the review was in press, I emailed him a copy. In return, he offered me a cup of tea in the Coombs Tea Room, and so, I met Brij Lal again for what was to become the first of many discussions. I would like to be able to say I remember every word of wisdom he offered me over that cup of tea, but what stands out—perhaps because he regularly repeats it—is his advice that ‘great work gets in the way of good work’, or, to put it another way, there are only two types of PhD: complete and incomplete. It is a mantra I now repeat to my students.

At the end of that first year Peter left the ANU for a chair at the University of the South Pacific and so I was in need of a new supervisor. I have since learnt that searching for a supervisor is a funny business, at any stage of candidature, but it seemed a particularly strange thing to be doing at a time when I already had a topic, had given my proposal talk and made a start on my empirical work. Essentially, the broad intellectual parameters of what I was doing were established—or at least I was fairly dogmatic that I wasn’t going to alter my direction—and so I was seeking a supervisor who wouldn’t want to tinker too much. Peter’s preference was Brij and, I was told, he was happy to take me and my project on. Despite this advice, I was somewhat apprehensive—Brij is a polarising figure, both politically and intellectually, and Pacific Studies at the ANU is rife with factions, rivalries and intrigue (not to mention I had just reviewed his book).¹ What I admired about Peter was that he seemed able to work between the lines whilst, as Brij’s student, I would become firmly ensconced in one camp. However, these doubts dissipated at the first panel meeting that Brij attended. He laid my proposal on the table, declared that I had achieved good progress, but said that he felt the value of the project was that it was about political people—the human dimension—and his only fear was that I would get side-tracked by the types of rigid theoretical arguments common in my discipline of political studies. It was music to my ears. And so, I began to regularly meet Professor Lal in his office.

Much of Professor Lal’s writings, both academic and creative, revolve around questions and notions of home and belonging. I have never been to Labasa or the India of his ancestors. I have, however, been to Suva, Honolulu, Port Moresby, the leafy Canberra suburb of Aranda and, more

1 I submitted the review to Vicki Luker, the executive editor of the *Journal of Pacific History*, who passed it on to the then review editor, Doug Munro. That is how Doug and I first came into contact. Doug had already commissioned a reviewer (Ghai 2011) so we agreed that he send my review to the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, where it was accepted (Corbett 2011).

recently, Jervis Bay, all places that Brij has, for a time, called home. But, despite this, for me, Professor Lal's true home is his office in the Coombs building, among his books, a cup of tea by his side, and a pen and paper close at hand. Professor Lal's office has its own biography (see Lal 2011: 127–38, so I will not describe it in detail). It is busy, not encumbered by administrative documents or student papers, but writing and reading, and what invariably strikes me every time I enter are the overflowing shelves that line every wall, the contents spilling onto piles on the floor. I have often stared enviously at the titles, knowing that many can no longer be purchased, but must be borrowed or bequeathed. Most are about the Pacific, particularly Fiji, and he has an opinion on the quality of all of them. ANU history professors loom the largest in his opinion of what scholarship ought to be: Oskar Spate, Ken Inglis, Bill Gammage and Hank Nelson to name but a few whose titles are regularly taken down from the shelf for approving inspection.

I have fond memories of that office. In the beginning, our conversations were about my PhD, its content and status, but as time passed they more often concerned cricket, departmental gossip, career and general life advice. As I start to supervise PhD students myself, I am developing an appreciation of the uniqueness and complexity of each relationship. Invariably some do not work out—and not all of those supervised by Professor Lal will share my warm recollections—but looking back I am humbled by how generous he was to me with both time and counsel. Indeed, at the beginning I worried about how frequently he wanted to meet—was I so far off track that I required constant oversight?—but I came to recognise that was not his purpose; he just cared. One reason for my initial concern was that he was never particularly effusive in his praise; he always focused on what could be improved, on how a piece could be made better. Indeed, amidst what I can only assume is a typically anxious process full of fear and self-doubt, it seemed to me that he spent much of his time extolling the virtues of his other students in my presence. It was only later, once I got to know these others, did I learn that he had nice things to say about my work behind my back as well.

Peter had many arguments for why Professor Lal would be a good supervisor but his most perceptive was that he would help kickstart my career. This has been true in several ways, not the least of which is his willingness to read and comment on applications and resumes, often at short notice. He is always quick to point out failings, but quicker still to recommend remedial action. So far, he has not led me astray. In many

ways, this should not come as a surprise. Professor Lal has studied the profession at length, sought to measure himself by its standards, and ultimately judges others by what he sees as markers of good scholarship: frequent production discernible by quality of style and substance. As academic practices are increasingly scrutinised by governments and their publics searching for value, this lesson is increasingly poignant. But perhaps it is easy to miss because he has achieved so much more than a continual stream of books, articles and chapters. His work as a ‘participant historian’ is well known, but what I find most endearing is his desire to inculcate a passion for writing, in a variety of styles and for different audiences, in his students. In many ways, this is the inversion of the bean-counting ethos that seems to have gained ascendancy in the academy. Instead, he draws on an alternate scholarly tradition that values a vibrant intelligentsia that contributes to the cultural life of a nation and its people. These traditions only remain alive while those who care about them seek to instil them in each new generation of the profession.

I am told that it is not uncommon for the relationship between supervisor and student to persist long after the PhD begins to gather dust. It also changes. Once, with Professor Lal’s help, I gained a postdoctoral fellowship at the ANU, he and I became colleagues and friends, although he remains a mentor. More importantly, Brij V. Lal and I began to talk about collaborating on a topic of shared interest: life writing (Corbett and Lal 2015). As an early career researcher, our collaboration brought home to me what it means to be a senior academic, and what it takes to get there.

To some extent, I only met Brij V. Lal, author of countless books and edited volumes, founder of journals and book series, convenor of workshops and keynote speaker at international conferences, after my PhD was submitted. Of course, I knew he was a big cheese—you don’t become a professor at the ANU without attaining some distinction in your chosen field—but I am still growing my appreciation of his standing in the field. As a PhD student I had a singular focus and the time to pursue it. Once employed, things inevitably changed and it is only once I started to balance these other priorities—teaching, administration and so forth—with the type of work that Brij V. Lal has spent a lifetime pursuing that I began to realise just how prolific he has been.

Meeting Brij V. Lal taught me what it means to be an academic, as opposed to a scholar. Academics have to publish and to do so they need journals and book presses. As an impressionistic young student I just assumed these things had a perennial existence and that if my work was good enough, it would get published. Brij V. Lal taught me that there is more to the story—that books, journals and academic standards are not a given, they have to be created and maintained—and, as a result, he impressed upon me the essence of what it means to be part of a profession. In particular, he emphasised the difference between submitting and being asked to submit, and the difference between getting published and being read. He showed me how pivotal editors are and stressed the importance of keeping them happy. Above all, by example and direction, he taught me that being an academic was a craft. It required skill and patience in equal measure, and, while it was easy to scorn the profession while praising its purpose, one does not usually exist without the other. In a sense, it resembles democratic politics; you can't have the game without its players, and Brij V. Lal is a well-practised player of the academic game.

And so, to use a term for a cricketing feat that I am yet to achieve, we have met a hat-trick of Lals. Brij Lal, whom I first encountered in a book about a long-dead politician; Professor Lal, whose office, for me, will always be synonymous with the very best traditions of the ANU; and Brij V. Lal, a collaborator, friend and mentor of merit and distinction. No doubt there are other Lals that his other friends and family know better than I. But I feel fortunate to have met and learnt from the three I know, for each of these Lals has marked my work for the better, influenced how I think about academia, and helped me to understand what being a scholar can and should be.

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