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The Boy from Labasa

Nicholas Halter

Brij Lal and I began our journey across inland Victoria in October 2014, almost four years since he had first agreed to supervise my PhD. My peers at The Australian National University (ANU) were surprised, to say the least, that I would embark on such an expedition with Brij. The prospect of sitting in a car alone with your supervisor for an entire weekend was daunting, and there was little in the flat, dry and barren landscapes of country Victoria to distract him from inquiring into the progress of my thesis. Our destination was Boort, a tiny town of wheat farmers in the northwest of the state, and birthplace of one of Brij's closest friends at ANU, Hank Nelson. Brij had recently co-edited a Festschrift for Hank titled *The Boy From Boort* (Gammage, Lal and Daws 2014), and we agreed to visit the town simply because neither of us knew anything about it. Origins are important to Brij and me, and for this reason I gladly accompanied him to Boort. He had written and reflected much on his own upbringing in Labasa, Fiji, and this visit to country Victoria was an opportunity to see the land that had shaped his dear friend, and witness the modest beginnings that he and Hank both shared.

On our journey, Brij reminisced on his early days in the Coombs building at ANU with Hank and other colleagues. Hank's down-to-earth and unassuming demeanour spoke to Brij's ideals. Brij was a man who treasured Australia's egalitarian principles—principles that assisted an ambitious young Indo-Fijian to rise to the top of his academic field, and principles that later comforted a man exiled from his homeland for

defending democracy. Brij admired his unpretentious, straight-talking colleagues. He detested bullshit and obfuscation, constantly reminding me that good scholarship was the ability to express complex ideas in clear and simple language. Whilst he expected hard work and diligence from his students, Brij was also a larrikin at heart. He was quick to make a witty pun, and his smile and laugh were infectious in the Coombs corridors.

I have often wondered if it was my direct and honest first encounter with Brij that won him over. He never ceased to embarrass me by regaling to others the story of our initial meeting, which I had asked for on the reasoning that I wanted to 'check him out'. I was 23 years old, naïve and underqualified, and I had no idea how famous (or infamous) Professor Lal was when I walked into the Coombs Tea Room to meet him. My proposed research topic was on Micronesia rather than Fiji, and only after lengthy discussions did we decide that a study of Australian travel writing was more appropriate. Later, I was surprised to learn that Brij's own journey to ANU began with an introduction as blunt and uninformed as my own. He had written a letter to the demography department at the time asking to begin a PhD, and his letter was passed around the building until it landed on the desk of Ken Gillion who agreed to take him on (Munro 2009: 248). I am grateful to Brij for repeating this act of generosity and trust towards me.

My close relationship with Brij was unusual compared to my peers. He would visit me at least once a week in my office, take me on walks around the Canberra bushlands, and invite me to his family home for special occasions. Brij shared much of his life with me, far and beyond other students whose supervisors were aloof or, more commonly, overloaded with teaching, grant-writing and research responsibilities. Never overbearing, Brij was adept at carefully balancing the role of friend and mentor simultaneously. I felt reassured knowing many students had sat in his office before, and Brij had seen them through to the end. Brij told me that his own time as a student at ANU was far different. Not only was he sent to Menzies Library to study alone for a year at the command of his supervisor, but he also submitted his thesis (in two volumes) for examination within three years, unchecked by any of his supervisors. This was an extraordinary feat considering he and Padma had started a family in Canberra, far from home. As a result of this baptism by fire, Brij was keenly aware of the vulnerabilities of PhD students, and always attentive

to the mental wellbeing of his students. Yet he also treasured the ability to thrive in quiet solitude, allowing me the intellectual freedom to pursue my own research relatively unopposed.

Unlike the countless people whom I watched consult Brij for the latest opinion on Fiji, or politics, or career advice, my discussions with Brij centred on history. Brij was eager to talk about his love of the discipline, and pass on every pearl of wisdom he could. Brij was one of the last of his generation of Pacific historians in Coombs and I felt privileged to have been student of his. He was a wonderful history teacher, and an engaging and entertaining speaker. ‘Make powerful points, not powerpoints!’, he would often remark before giving a lecture, proudly showing me his single sheet of paper with handwritten notes. And of course, Brij always had one well-rehearsed comedic line to win over his audience, a joke that would have been tested beforehand on his unsuspecting PhD students.

Brij’s scholarly contribution to Pacific history is impressive, not to mention his work on the Indian diaspora more broadly. His list of publications is incredibly long, and I would often walk into his office proud to have written 200 words in a day, only to leave dismayed that he had written 2,000. It was exciting to be able to discuss Pacific history with someone that had met, and worked with, its key founders and figures. We discussed the discipline’s merits and its complications, reflecting on its past developments, and postulating on its fragile future in the corridors of ANU. In some ways Brij was nostalgic as he recalled the old days of his beloved Coombs building and bemoaned the loss of a sense of community. Yet his concerns also reflected a broader dissatisfaction amongst staff and students with the institutional changes being implemented in Australian academia (Lal 2011: 127–38). Amidst this uncertainty, many people would visit Brij for advice, one of the few people with the historical memory of ANU and Coombs, and someone who would always offer a friendly smile and a generous ear.

Yet the most important lessons I learnt from Brij were not about the nuances and debates within Pacific history. Rather, Brij inspired within me a love of writing, and a conviction in the importance of writing history. Brij loved reading anything and everything, from history to poetry, be it fiction, non-fiction, or ‘faction’ as he called it. I realised my literary education needed much improvement as Brij would regularly test my knowledge of authors and artists. The Brij I know enjoys writing more reflective and personal pieces, musing on important moments in

his life, writing about stories of pain and struggle and happiness, stories that resonated with audiences beyond the academic world. This style of writing is a great pleasure to Brij, and his personal pieces found a captive audience, most evident in the success of *Mr Tulsi's Store* (Lal 2001) and *The Coombs: A House of Memories* (Lal and Ley 2006).

Under Brij's guidance, I found confidence in my own voice, and my writing improved considerably. He once asked me to write 300 words on the subject 'Why I write', a simple yet memorable task that provoked deep self-questioning. Brij's response to this same question was that he wrote to bear witness to his time and place. Brij was unusual in that he did not simply bear witness, but he also played an active role in shaping his nation's history and bringing to the fore voices previously unheard or ignored. His indefinite exile made his writing all the more significant. Brij told me he wrote books in the hope that they would stand the test of time, even if no one in Fiji ever read them. While at ANU, I enjoyed the emotional, personal and practical side of history that Brij showed to me, and the passion he has for both Fiji and for scholarship. Not only has his career helped to give a voice to Indian migrants in Fiji, but it has also helped connect transient people to their roots all over the world. I would often hear him answering phone calls from Indo-Fijians asking for help to trace their family origins. Brij was not one to sit in his ivory tower—history was as much about being socially engaged and responsible as it was about pursuing new and innovative research.

We discussed some of these historiographical and philosophical questions during the drive to and from Boort. Our conversations were influenced by the recent and much-anticipated national elections in Fiji, during which time news of the victory of Frank Bainimarama's 'Fiji First' party was dwarfed by other more dramatic events including the Scottish referendum, the Ebola virus outbreak in Africa, instability in the Middle East (including the ransom of Fijian troops captured whilst working for the UN in Syria), and police raids on alleged terrorist cells in Australia. Those few reports about the Fiji election pronounced it a success to the world, supported by official statements from independent observers and Australian officials who were relieved to see democracy restored. For someone unfamiliar with the long and turbulent history of Fiji it appeared a resounding victory, and a successful future for Fiji looked promising. Yet I was shocked how easily the past decade of violence, repression and military rule could be forgotten—a past that significantly shaped the outcome of the election, and would certainly influence the future.

Although Brij did not visibly show it, I suspected his subdued demeanour following the election betrayed the anguish he felt at heart. It was unusual considering Brij was normally so positive and hopeful, despite the constant disappointment of broken promises, defamation from Fiji and abroad, and the consistent efforts of the Fijian military regime to restrict democratic processes. During our conversation in the car, Brij confessed he had initially decided to decline requests for interviews and commentary on the Fiji elections, until he was convinced otherwise by Padma who reminded him that there was no one else in his unique position with the authority or the conviction to speak out. It was then that I realised the importance of an historian's contribution to public debate. Brij's strength as an historian was evident in his cautious avoidance of the grand, sweeping generalisations and speculation of journalists and political commentators (dialogue that he termed 'paper fire' because it burned brightly, but was short-lived). Rather, Brij brought a measured, thoughtful and historical perspective to an otherwise uncritical debate. Whether or not you agreed with his position at that time, Brij was undoubtedly regarded an authority on Fiji, a position that was hard-earned through years of dedicated study in the academic profession. I also believe Brij is widely respected because he sticks to his guns. He was a constant in a rapidly changing and flippant political landscape in Fiji. Just as Hank had shown him, he also demonstrated to me the importance of being honest, upfront, consistent and, above all, strictly adhering to your principles and values.

I feel truly privileged to have been one of Brij's last students before his retirement. Shortly after our return from Boort on the 25 October, I was invited to a Diwali celebration at his home in Aranda. In many ways, this celebration reflected the shift in direction for Brij from a public and academic life to a private one. Rather than a sky full of lights and noises from the cacophony of fireworks and celebrations in Suva, we sat underneath a dark and silent Canberra sky, noticed only by the curious possums in the gum trees above. An unusual mix of cultures, ages and professions, Fiji friends, families, children, Rotarians, past and present students. A kava bowl in the corner, hot curries on the table, an esky full of beers and a good selection of Aussie wines, the occasional Island souvenir or picture hanging in the living room. In the darkness our faces were lit by the small, soft crackle of our sparklers. The most joyous and excited face belonged to Brij's first grandson, Jayan. Brij has often written and spoken about the love he had for his grandfather and the trials and tribulations he had faced in order to secure a better future for his family. Now Brij

is in the same position to offer love and guidance to his own grandson. He has stocked his library full of his most precious books, ready for Jayan to read, keeping the memories of Fiji alive in his new Australian home.

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