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Chapter Author(s): Doug Munro

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In His Own Words

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Indenture and Contemporary Fiji

Doug Munro

This interview was conducted by Doug Munro on 9 October 1995 at the University of the South Pacific. At the time Brij Lal was one of three members of Fiji's Constitutional Review Commission, and he was completing his biography of A.D. Patel.¹

DM: I would like to start off by noting that you are the grandson of one of the 60,000 Indian indentured labourers on Fiji. How would you describe your background?

BVL: My grandfather came to Fiji in 1908. After serving his five-year term of indenture he leased some native land and started his family there. My parents grew up in Labasa and I was born in Tabia village where the family farm still exists. Like most Indian people of that generation, my parents were illiterate although my mother somehow learned how to sign her name. But always at the back of their minds was the memory of indenture—the poverty, the petty humiliations—and my parents did not want to see their children go through a similar experience. Moreover, there was the insecurity of land tenure. We could only lease land for short periods; we could not own land. We were a large family of eight people so there was no way in which our parents could provide for all of us a future on the land, so economic insecurity played a part. Also, education was culturally valued by our community. Most primary schools were started

¹ Republished with permission from *Itinerario: European Journal of Overseas History*, 21(1) (1997): 16–27.

by our parents and grandparents amidst great difficulties. I went to the local primary school (which in fact is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year) and then to Labasa College for my high school education and from there to university here and elsewhere. But it was that experience of growing up on the farm that I think has been very important in shaping my imagination, helping me understand certain things. My interest in history really starts there.

DM: It is fair enough to say that you come from an improving class that was intent on upward social and economic mobility for subsequent generations. But you come from a fairly disadvantaged background and also an improbable background for someone who has since become one of the two foremost historians of Fiji and also an authority on the history of indentured servitude. So, interest aside, what made you become an historian and not something else? You did say that your background gave you a sense of a past that had to be rectified. But what about the opportunities that came your way and the people who helped to make it possible?

BVL: Growing up on a small farm in an isolated part of Fiji where a week old *Fiji Times* or *Shanti Dut* was the only interesting reading material available, I felt the need to know about the outside world beyond the village. My grandfather was alive when I was a child. I used to sleep in his bed and he used to tell me stories about India, about his growing up in a village, about why he came. When I was a child I used to see these funny looking people, the surviving *girmitiyas*, wearing turbans and *dhoti*, congregating in the evenings under a mango tree or in a small shed, smoking *hukka* and talking in a strange language. They used to sing *bhajan* together. This intrigued me, and I suppose it is not altogether surprising that my first book deals with the background and identity of these people, a kind of collective biography (Lal 1983a). My high school teachers played an important role, too. I wanted to do English literature and history. Both these subjects really interested me and I had some fantastic teachers who asked us to read writers like W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, the Bronte sisters, Shakespeare, the American classics of John Steinbeck and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Australian authors like Patrick White. We read many of the great classics of English literature. And we had a history teacher—who later became a labour politician—who one day turned up for class with a placard around his neck bearing the opening words of *The Communist Manifesto*. They were people who took their profession seriously, were interested and interesting, and who encouraged

us to go on. I got the sense when I was at high school that knowledge was fun and that passion to understand has continued. I chose history but to this day I have an abiding love of good literature.

DM: As you said earlier, you found your niche, initially, in the history of the *girmitiyas*. I take it that your own background provided you with some advantage, if only a sense of commitment.

BVL: Yes, it was a project in which the heart and the head came together. I was writing about my own people, about myself really. So there was a sense of immediacy, emotional attachment. I had the language, I had contacts. I was making discoveries which had a direct social and personal interest. I have since discovered—no doubt my early exposure to great literature played a part here—that I am not very good at things abstract, remote. A subject has to appeal to me emotionally, has to have some personal relevance, for me to be intellectually engaged with it. The great Australian historian, Ken Inglis, once said that history is largely concealed autobiography (Inglis 1983: 1). I think there is much truth in that.

Take my eventual choice of a thesis topic. At first I wrote to The Australian National University saying that I wanted to do a PhD in historical demography. But they had no one to supervise me and also thought that I had insufficient background in mathematics. So they shifted me into history, and there was Ken Gillion, the distinguished scholar of Indian migration and of indenture (Gillion 1962). Ken told me that there was the topic of the Fiji Indians and he also mentioned that I could work on Sikhs on Fiji, because my Master's thesis was on Sikhs in Vancouver. There was this larger Sikh diaspora which Ken thought I could explore. But I found after a month or so of reading that I could not become enthused with the subject, so Ken said: the Fiji aspect of indenture is covered (and there might have been a territorial element there) so why not look at the background of these people in India—why they came? who they were? and the whole process of recruitment and migration. He had in mind the idea that I might be able to provide some insights into the whole process of migration and social change in one part of India. So that is how I started.

DM: Soon after we first met as postgraduate students in 1979 you presented a seminar paper on your PhD work that challenged the notion that *girmitiyas* were deceived into signing on for service on Fiji. It struck me at the time as rather too assiduous an application of the type

of history that was around the Department of Pacific History at ANU at the time—the Davidson tradition, if you like—where Pacific Islanders (and indentured Asians for that matter) were accorded a proactive role in the shaping of events and their outcomes (Davidson 1966). Afterwards, by contrast, when you followed the *girmitiyas* onto the plantations, and published a series of articles in the mid-1980s, a very indignant tone enters your writing, and you stress the exploitative and oppressive lives led by the *girmitiyas* (esp. Lal 1986a). Put it this way: I noticed the contrast.

BVL: I am not sure that when I went to do my PhD I had read what Davidson had written about agency and the role Pacific Islanders themselves had played in the making of their own histories. The book on Pacific history that most impressed me initially was Peter Corris's work on the Solomon Island labour recruitment and migration (Corris 1973). Also, a highly influential work came out in 1974 and that was Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery*—a very emotional work whose thesis is explicit in the title (Tinker 1974). I began to wonder as I read more about the tremendous changes taking part in nineteenth-century India, and the enormous migration from the Indo-Gangetic plain to different parts of the world, whether it could be that millions of people would leave their homes because they were deceived. It just did not sound right to me. Also, I realised that people over a 40-year period, even more in some cases, were leaving India for other colonies, coming back, and so there were communication links. So I was not convinced that deception was as important a factor in inducing people to leave. I do not discount that fraud and deceit were important factors in inducing people to move. But its extent seemed to be exaggerated. After all, migration to Fiji and other colonies was but a very small part of a larger process of migration to, say, the Assam gardens, to the Calcutta jute mills, to the coal mines in Bihar, to the Bombay textile mills—and there was a very lively debate going on at that time about the role that the British had played in undermining the handicraft industry and to what extent poverty in India was caused by British colonial policies (e.g. Morris 1968a, 1968b). Given the context of what was taking place in India at the time, my emphasis was on agency and participation by the subjects themselves.

Now, if there is a shift in tone when I write about indenture on Fiji, I would say that it is not as marked as you suggest. It is all a matter of perspective. I do not discount the oppressive consequences of the plantation system, and the terrible conditions under which *girmitiyas* lived and worked and survived. But I have also emphasised the role

of individuals themselves in making their own history. You will note the emphasis I have placed on *sirdars* or Indian foremen—their collaborative role with the overseers and the plantation management. In my article on women and suicide—the social history of indenture—I look at the role of sexism and racism (Lal 1985). I look at the role that the patriarchal values played in marginalising women from the social processes (Lal 1986b). So there is some continuity. I look at the role of individuals in making their own history. When I talk about recruitment I look at the reasons why they left. And when I look at the experience on plantations, I try to understand why things happened the way they did, and in that context I emphasise individual agency.

DM: Those articles in the mid-'80s were highly revisionary. Where do you think that your work goes beyond your predecessors? I mean, Ken Gillion must have been a hard act to follow.

BVL: Ken Gillion's book *Fiji's Indian Migrants* is still a standard starting point, but it is a product of its time. I think what Gillion was trying to do was to maintain 'balance'. I have looked at the same records that he looked at, and many more. I have the sense that he did not mine as much out of the historical evidence as he might have. He was loath to upset the balance of perspective, so everyone gets their share of his attention. As an historian, Ken was making an evaluation of the total system and he attempts to provide a complete picture of the entire experience. I admire his work to that extent. It is what helps to make it an invaluable point of reference. But when you go beyond that framework, I think you begin to realise that things are more complex.

DM: Such as the question of women and suicide?

BVL: Exactly. Not only Gillion but others who have written about the very high suicide rate among the *girmitiyas* always held the 'immoral character' of women as the major factor. But I cannot expect them to anticipate the thinking and research of a generation later. I respect and admire the work that has been accomplished and I am mindful of the context in which it was written, the paradigms used. But I think that we have moved on in pushing the frontiers of indenture historiography.

DM: In what ways do you feel, then, that your work has advanced on your predecessors'?

BVL: I suppose my contribution would be in enlarging our understanding of the everyday life on plantations—through the exploration of specific issues, such as the treatment of women, such as social problems of suicide, such as workers' actual experiences on plantations, and the methods that they used to accommodate and resist the demands made on them. That is where I have tried to link the Indo-Fijian experience with experiences elsewhere. I have tried to be broader than the very Fiji-focused work of my predecessors and not only relate it to the Indians' indenture experiences elsewhere but to work into Pacific Islands history generally. I think, if I can be so bold as to say so, that my contribution is to locate Fiji Indian history in the indenture experience in this larger context. I think I have also used more cultural evidence, such as in my work on Totaram Sanadhaya (Lal and Yadav 1994), and the kind of work I now propose to do, looking at representing the human reality of the experience.

DM: Both of us take an explicitly comparative perspective. Where we broadly differ is that I am concerned with the more conventional questions of power relations in the plantations, resistance and accommodation. You are concerned with that too but go further because you are interested in the hidden world of the worker—on questions of evolving identity, individual and group.

BVL: Well I think that the work that you have done on power relations is vital. That sets the framework and the parameter. Without that groundbreaking work it would be very difficult to do the work that we are thinking of doing now. I do not think that one is necessarily better than the other. I think it is very important—and this is in line with developments in historiography—to look at the experience of workers, the unwritten history of people, deciphering their texts. That is interesting, that is useful. I believe I have access to certain sources and that I have certain skills by virtue of who I am—a member of the community that I am writing about—access to information, and to that extent I am privileged. I find it interesting, this history of the subaltern strata. It fascinates me and how to incorporate their experiences, their vision, their hopes into the larger text is what historians have done for other parts of the world for slavery, indenture, peasants. So this approach is informed by developments elsewhere, which try to represent the experience of the ordinary people.

DM: If you had to make a statement on the nature of indenture, at least with respect to the Indian diaspora, what would it be?

BVL: Leaving aside the questions of exploitation, racism and the institutional aspects of indenture, I think that the indenture experience is an extremely important, formative and defining period in the history of overseas Indian communities, particularly in the Caribbean, Mauritius, South Africa and Fiji, because that is the site of the initial social transformation. It is fundamental. When the Old World meets the New, then old ways of doing things, old values, institutions, and practices start to change. We begin to confront the reality of a completely different order when former ways of doing things, the world view, seem to lose their relevance. The caste system breaks down, and along with that a host of social conventions and practices. Everyone is a 'coolie', huddled together on estate lines in cramped quarters. In that sense, everyone is equal in the denial of their individual humanity. The indenture experience was a great leveller of hierarchy and status. So I see the indenture process as the death of one world and the beginning of another. The details vary from colony to colony, but the process is the same everywhere.

DM: A feature of your work is that you have moved purposefully through the major divisions of not just indenture history but Fiji history—from your Master's thesis on the Sikhs through to the origins and plantation experiences of Indo-Fijians. That done, you have written extensively on contemporary Fijian political history, most recently a biography of the great Indian leader A.D. Patel. Now you are looking at indenture in a far more comparative perspective. There does seem to be a rhythm and a pattern that your work has gone through. Was this planned or semi-planned, or was it the way that things simply panned out?

BVL: Simply the way things panned out. I had absolutely no idea when I finished my PhD that I would go on and do work on Fijian indenture. When I went to Hawai'i I thought I had done enough on indenture on Fiji and I expected to move on to other things. For a while I contemplated writing a history of indenture in Hawai'i.

DM: But that was exactly the time that you were writing all those articles on indenture on Fiji.

BVL: If in hindsight there is a pattern, it was not carefully designed. My journey into various things has basically come from the quest to understand myself. Indenture provided an understanding of my origins, my social identity, my beginnings. Then I wanted to look at my place in the wider society of Fiji and that is why I began to think more systematically

about the larger social environment which also informed my identity and where I was. As for contemporary political history, I have certainly had a very keen desire to understand the present. For me, history provides a tool and a method to understand the contemporary world. And I have always found myself, as one reviewer put it, an interested spectator of the history of Fiji. My work, when I was at the University of the South Pacific and then at Hawai'i, deals with contemporary issues—beginning with my research into the 1982 Fiji elections (Lal 1983b)—partly because I was living in separate environments where I was constantly called upon to comment on social problems and social issues—and more so on Fiji as a member of a small educated elite. I could not have neglected that responsibility, and the more I was asked to comment about politics, about contemporary developments, the more I began to move closer to the recent period. The past and present, to me, are not discrete entities, they are two sides of the same coin, and I enjoy living and working at the interface between the two.

DM: And then, I guess, Fijian history thrust itself upon you with the coups in 1987 and that was something you could not have avoided even if you had wanted to. You have made the point that your approach to political history, and especially writing the contemporary history of this country, is one of '[c]ritical attachment rather than cool detachment' (Lal 1992: xvii). Could you elaborate?

BVL: Yes, I was here during that critical period in 1987. I care deeply about this country, about its people, about its future. I cannot be indifferent to it. Cool detachment, in my view, comes from someone who assumes an air of dispassionate objectivity, distance and a certain coolness—the sense that one can stand outside time and space and history and judge things impartially, which is certainly not for me. One cannot be neutral about the coup. One can try and understand but one cannot claim complete detachment. So in that sense when I talk about critical attachment I write with affection, I write with a certain concern and commitment. I just cannot be indifferent to what happens in this country where I was born.

DM: I remember you telling me that you wrote your book on the Fiji coups (Lal 1988) in a matter of weeks, this outpouring of words with papers and research notes lying all over the living room floor, totally absorbed in your work, your family life on hold. I got the impression that

this writing performance was a matter of release, almost as though the exorcist had walked through the door. What is it like, to work under that sort of impetus?

BVL: A month after the coup I went back to Honolulu where I was teaching and where I had my regular job. I had just experienced a major event in the life of one Pacific Island nation, but on Hawai'i, except for very brief and rather ill-informed commentary, there was absolutely no awareness of the depth of the tragedy and its implications for the Pacific Islands region as a whole. There were colleagues who were sympathetic but they lacked even the most basic understanding of Fijian politics and social dynamics. I found myself talking to myself. I could not communicate my experiences to people under these circumstances, so I turned to writing. I found that words just came tumbling out. I sat there and wrote and wrote and wrote, and at the end of it I felt exhausted and relieved. I also desperately wanted to contribute an alternative explanation about the causes of the coup, contrary to what was portrayed in the media. There was that additional pressure, self-imposed I suppose.

You see, there is something fundamentally wrong and immoral about deposing a duly democratically elected government through a military coup, a government that had been in office less than a month. Most people in this country regret that the Labour government was not given sufficient time to prove itself. Given its inexperience and the nature of the coalition agreement they may or may not have succeeded. But I think that denying them the opportunity was wrong. Fiji faced the first test of democracy—respecting the electorate's verdict on a change of government—and it failed the test.

DM: I guess that you find the writing about recent events a very different type of exercise than writing about the more distant past.

BVL: No.

DM: Could you comment, then, upon the possibility and the desirability of writing about the very recent past, particularly when you do not know what is going to happen next, such as a coup just around the corner?

BVL: I would disagree with you about the differences between writing about the distant past and more recent times. I would argue that the processes of investigation are the same. The critical approach to one's sources, the evaluation of evidence, rigour, rules of verification—all these

apply as much to ancient history as to modern history. I think there are distinct advantages in writing about more recent times, in terms of evidence and more varied opportunities to cross-check it. Oral evidence has an extremely vital role to play. It is a source, when properly used, that can enrich and deepen a study in ways that archival documents cannot. So I feel that in that sense there are opportunities.

DM: But there are certain opportunities that you will not get in dealing with the more distant past, apart from the advantage of oral evidence and of course there is more evidence as time moves on. I am not questioning the points you made about the need for the critical approach, methodology and rigour. But often the documents are not available to you, and in your book *Broken Waves* you could only use documents up to 1959. And also perhaps the constraints of common decency will not allow you to talk about certain things within the lifetime of individuals, in much the same way as Jim Davidson, when writing his book on Samoa, imposed a self-denying ordinance by declining to identify those people, especially close colleagues, when he had something wholly derogatory to say about them (Davidson 1969: 37–38).

BVL: Yes, certainly the points you make about the unavailability of certain kinds of documents can be a problem. But when I researched the more recent period, from the 1960s, I found that a lot of confidential material found its way into the media, into the Hansard of the Legislative Council and the House of Representatives, private papers and tapes of the meetings in the possession of individuals. Information is available in different ways and I think that I was not unduly disadvantaged. And then of course you have the vernacular and English-language newspapers, which report meetings, issues and events of substance. While you do not know exactly what the governors said to London, for example, you do know broadly speaking what happened. For an historian it is not so much these facts but explaining them and providing the context that is important. The other point you raised, about people talking to you in confidence, is one we have to grapple with. It does raise the ethical problem of how to use that evidence. The approach that I have taken is not to mention names, who said what to whom, but if I found the evidence credible, and was able to verify it independently, I would state the substance of their view without breaching confidentiality, real or implied. I am not being dishonest with the evidence given to me but at the same time I am concerned not to divulge the source, unless the person said otherwise.

Of course, when you talk to people and get to know them, socialise with them, it does become rather difficult to write critically about them and there is always the risk of compromising yourself. For that reason I have deliberately kept myself away from the powers that be. I always want to maintain my distance and my independence. There is nothing more satisfying than writing the truth as you see it, unaffected by social obligations and unfettered by the potential consequences of your work.

DM: Writers of contemporary history, more so than so-called 'conventional' historians, are at risk of being overtaken by events. If you had to write your book on the Fiji coup now, rather than in 1988, in what ways would it be the same or different?

BVL: This is a very important question. Since writing the book I have read what other people have written, I have talked to many people very close to the action, and I can say truthfully that nothing I have heard since I wrote my account causes me to change my mind. On the contrary, if I can say so, I am comforted, reassured by what has happened since the coups, that my analysis is correct. A few details here and there may vary, but the foundations remain unshaken. I argued then, and I believe even more strongly now, that the coup was not so much about race as it was a deliberate act of contrivance by vested interests bent on recapturing power they had lost at the polls. There was nothing inevitable about the coup. Coups do not solve problems, they compound them.

DM: In what ways do you apply your training as an historian to your work on the Constitutional Review Commission? Does it give access to insights and understandings that would not be possible otherwise?

BVL: Yes. I think I have a fairly good understanding of the dynamics of Fijian history. I am aware of previous attempts at constitution-making, and I have read very carefully and closely the Hansard; the transcripts of the Constitutional Conferences in 1965 and 1970; the records of the Street Commission in 1975; and the various commissions in and attempts at constitution-making since 1987. When you see the kinds of issues that were raised, the kinds of solutions that were devised or proposed, you notice that the basic issues have not changed very much. The same issues are repeated in various forms at various times. So it is an awareness of the historical dimension that I bring to my present work on the Commission. I suppose I also bring the ability and the training of the historian to read critically, to make an evaluation of an enormous amount of evidence

that comes your way through public submissions. Reading, analysis, synthesis: these are part and parcel of our trade. Also, a certain humanistic perspective, as I believe that constitution-making is not simply a legal task; it involves people, it involves the hopes and aspirations of people, and in that sense the background and broadening experience in the humanities helps me understand better the large issues.

DM: You have written prolifically but you have also confined yourself largely to Fiji and the Indian diaspora. I make this observation in the light of Oskar Spate's call, back in the late 1970s, that historians from the Pacific Islands should tackle European themes 'in their own right', and that we should have as 'our ideal, a community of scholars drawn from both cultures, each of whom can move in either with reasonable, even if not quite equal, assurance' (Spate 1978: 44). Even after all these years it has not reached the stage where historians indigenous to the region have moved outside their own cultures and backgrounds. Do you have any comment on this state of affairs?

BVL: Yes, it is a pattern; but I am not sure that it is a bad one, actually, because we are able to offer a particular perspective, borne out of lifelong experience. We have access to certain resources—language, people, data, evidence—that may not be easily available to others. And once you begin writing you tend to stick to a particular course, and unless there is a major shift in your life from one university to another, or some other circumstance, you tend to keep generally in the same broad field. It is natural and pretty universal, I think. The other thing that is important for me is the commitment I talked about earlier. I have a commitment to my discipline and profession, but my greater commitment is to the subjects that I write about. I am very deeply committed to the history and politics of the country of my birth, as I am also to the broader Indian diaspora of which I am a fragment. I have not ventured further afield because there is so much that keeps me occupied. Unlike international relations experts, sociologists, and such, for whom the concepts and theories matter more than particular geographic regions or topics as such, historians tend to learn the language, immerse themselves in the culture, and that gives their work a certain depth and enduring quality. They make a longer-term commitment to their particular subject.

DM: There is also another point and that is the Pacific Islands of the 1990s reminds me very much of New Zealand in the 1950s. I grew up in a place where there were very limited opportunities for artists and writers,

many of whom took off for greener overseas pastures. Is it not necessary, in much the same way, for historians from within the region to get out in order to get on, and often just to do worthwhile things?

BVL: I think that is absolutely vital. I do not at all accept the idea that to write sympathetically and knowledgeably about the Islands you have to live in the Islands. Certainly you have to immerse yourself in the culture and learn the language, but the place where you work and write is irrelevant. In fact, it is very important for Island scholars to spend time outside the region, to reacquaint themselves with the latest developments in their fields. I would take Oskar Spate's point further and say that it is invaluable for Island scholars to spend time at metropolitan universities, and for people from those areas to spend time in the Islands. I am a strong believer in collaboration, in doing things together, helping each other out and sharing information, experiences, and, in the process, enriching ourselves and our discipline as well.

DM: Finally, could you provide a preview of your forthcoming book on A.D. Patel (Lal 1997).

BVL: A.D. Patel was politically active in Fiji from the late 1920s to the late 1960s. Fine mind, fine intellect, who believed in democracy, liberty, equality, justice; who fought against colonialism and the mighty Colonial Sugar Refining (CSR) Company on behalf of the cane growers. He was a man of wide reading and great learning. Edmund Burke was regular fare, Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manly Hopkins, great Indian classics of Kalidas and Kautilya and, most important of all, the Bhagvat Gita. He spoke several languages and was the leading criminal lawyer in this country. Lord Denning, the Master of the Rolls, described him as one of the most outstanding advocates he had ever met. So I found him fascinating. I empathise with his vision of Fiji as an inclusive, democratic, non-racial society. These are things I find attractive, but I feel that he has not been given enough credit in the history of Fiji. He was the one, more than anyone else, who agitated for independence, and was responsible for the departure of the CSR Company in 1973, three years after independence. But you find his name omitted from the gallery of people who have had a hand in making the history of the country.

I have never written a biography before and what I am trying to do in this work is to present an alternative vision for Fiji, and I have let Patel speak as much as I can. I am not being judgemental. I just say: this is what he

was saying, and the context in which he was saying these things. I place on record his thoughts, ideas and experiences, and create a text that others will hopefully find interesting and useful.

DM: And after Patel?

BVL: Let me finish this constitutional work first.

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