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Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji  
(review)

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*Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji*, by Brij V Lal.

A Prashant Pacific Book. Canberra: Division of Pacific and Asian History, The Australian National University; Suva: The Fiji Museum, 2000.

ISBN 0-909524-39-4; xviii + 420 pages, maps, photographs, figures, tables, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. US\$25.00.

An odd combination of historical essays, autobiographical musings, and analytical demography, this volume purports to be a journey through the history of indentured labor in Fiji. (Indians were shipped to Fiji between 1879 and 1916 as coolie labor and worked in sugarcane plantations run by various concerns, the largest being the Australian-owned CSR company.) Barring six papers and two translations of Totaram Sanadhya's reflections on his time as a coolie in Fiji, the bulk of the book is the work of Brij Lal, the outstanding historian in this area of study. Lal has always been a historian of the empirical rather than the theoretical school; he is strong on archival research and data analysis and the best of his essays display this strength. Unlike the historians of the Subaltern Collective, however, he gives short shrift to the important and difficult issue of methodology. As Guha, Chakravarty, Prakash, Spivak, and others have demonstrated, a self-reflexive inquiry into the nature of history writing is essential to any post-colonial project attempting to reconfigure a discourse whose codes, rules, and procedures stem from Europe. When the subject under discussion is indentured labor (*girmit*), that most subaltern of all subjects, the question of methodology becomes even more

urgent. For this reason, instead of Doug Monroe's rather pointless eulogy of Lal's oeuvre, an extended meditation on the act of historical mediation would have been, I think, a better way to start the book. Lal is an important historian and sooner rather than later he will need to grapple with this aspect of his work.

For those familiar with Kenneth Gillion's *Fiji's Indian Migrants* (1962) and Hugh Tinker's magisterial study, *A New System of Slavery* (1974), the first seven chapters provide little that is honestly new. With the exception of the second chapter, which narrates Lal's journey to his ancestral village of Bahraich, the remaining chapters furnish a broad-brush account of migration trends according to districts and provinces; the "push" and "pull" factors determining population movements; caste, gender, and age composition of the migrants; the part played by recruiters as well as their agents; life in the depots prior to emigration; conditions aboard sailing (and later steam) ships during the passage; statistics on suicide in the plantations; and so on. Much of this information can be gleaned from earlier studies, including Lal's own *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (1983). It may be that the real worth of these initial macro accounts is preparatory, since they clear the ground for the truly path-breaking "micro studies," such as "The Wreck of Syria," "Veil of Dishonour," and "Kunti's Cry." In the earlier chapters Lal struggles to say something original, and even his provocative observation that Tinker's "new system of slavery" argument glosses over the fact that a clutch of laborers benefited from indenture appears to miss the point regarding

the structural nature of the new slavery. That some laborers, when confronted by a brutal form of unfreedom, participated in the hierarchical relations of exploitation (by becoming *sirdars* [sub-overseers], for example), tells us a great deal about the power mechanisms (ideology) sustaining the system. It does not make the structure any freer. Clearly it is the slave structure of this new system of industrial agriculture that laid the conditions for the emergence of the subject, whether one is thinking of the coolie, the *sirdar*, the overseer, or the planter.

While he fails to critically reflect on his methodology, what is compelling about Lal's "micro studies" approach is his growing concern with agency as an elusive thing, spiraling out of the hands of the subaltern agent. In "Kunti's Cry," Lal takes a seemingly minor incident of a coolie woman's attempted rape by an overseer in Nadewa, Fiji, and proceeds to describe the discursive, racial, perceptual, and demographic circumstances that led to that and other violent episodes in Fiji's plantations. In the process he debunks some tenacious myths—such as the popular view that indentured women were originally prostitutes or from lowly castes or that sexual jealousy was a primary cause of murder and suicide in Fiji. He also refers to the political usefulness of the Kunti incident to anti-indenture lobbyists in India, who used it to launch "an unprecedentedly intense campaign to stop emigration . . . altogether." Kunti's cry was heard differently by a set of powerful actors with their own agendas and objectives. In the end, however, it was an expression of all that was wrong with a labor system based on gender disproportion, nar-

row barrack housing lacking in privacy, nonrecognition of customary marriage practices, and collusion in the excesses of task-work that forced some women into prostitution. In the chapters where Lal shifts from the particular example to the general system that makes the particular example possible, he is at his most persuasive. He is less convincing in the generalist papers, and he is clearly not comfortable in the genre of autobiography.

Of the chapters not written by Lal, three provide statistically rich accounts of death, disease, and accidental deaths during indenture. One examines the episode of a pregnant coolie woman brutally abused by a white overseer; another contends that the Labasa Strike of 1907 was one of the few acts of resistance, albeit unsuccessful, directed at the coercive control exercised by the plantocracy. Of these chapters, Jane Harvey's "Naraini's Story" and Matthew Ryan's "The Labasa Strike, 1907" manage to steer clear of the bog of statistics; unlike the others, Harvey and Ryan use data to serve a narrative purpose—and history is, after all, memory's narrative—rather than the reverse. Ryan is the only contributor in the volume to make use of Foucauldian insights into disciplinary structures of the plantation system, and his essay is the stronger for it. Harvey has obviously paid close attention to Lal's "micro studies" approach; "Naraini's Story" employs the same methodological procedure as "Kunti's Cry" and the result is just as persuasive.

The translations of Totaram Sanadhya's observations of life in the plantations are, without doubt, the

highlight of the book. Various wry, sardonic, melodramatic, didactic, subversive, accusatory, despairing, and philosophical, Sanadhya—or rather his scribe, Benarsidas Chaturvedi—manages to turn the plantation anecdote into a genre of resistance writing par excellence. His prose is not always of the highest order, but he has an eye for detail that never fails to impress, and his passing metaphors are at times breathtaking both in accuracy and beauty: “When the rashes on my skin seemed to grow large as a rupee coin, I lit a fire in my room and the mosquitoes disappeared.” Racked by hunger and on the verge of suicide, Sanadhya creates poetry out of suffering. To one who is his spiritual heir, that act is both a strategy for survival and the legacy of a survivor.

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*Dauka Puran*, by Subramani.  
New Delhi: Star Publications, 2001.  
ISBN 81-7650-035-6, 521 pages.  
Written in Indo-Fijian. Distributed by  
University Book Centre, University of  
the South Pacific.

The publication of Subramani's *Dauka Puran* is an important event in the literary and cultural history of the Indo-Fijian community in particular, and of Fiji in general. At over five hundred pages, the novel may also be the longest piece of sustained prose in a vernacular language in the entire written literature of the Pacific Islands. This is no mean achievement. That it is written by a scholar and teacher of English literature makes that achieve-

ment even more remarkable (I have vivid memories of Subramani introducing us in Labasa Secondary School to Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, T S Eliot's *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, and *Hamlet's* soliloquies).

Subramani is not the first Fiji writer to use Fiji-Hindi. Pandit Babu Ram Sharma of Ba published a small book in Fiji-Hindi in the early 1990s, which provides tantalizing glimpses into the inner world of the rural Indo-Fijian community. Around the same time, Raymond Pillay completed his play, *Adhura Sapana* (Unfulfilled Dream). And several other writers have over the years used the language to lend credibility and authenticity to their literary explorations of Indo-Fijian life. But Subramani is the first major writer to exploit fully the creative possibilities of a language often assumed to have no redeeming linguistic features, and to be limited and limiting in its vocabulary and cultural and emotional range. Subramani demonstrates these assumptions to be palpably untrue. This is one of the enduring contributions of the novel.

*Dauka* is a difficult word to translate into English. Very broadly, it could be interpreted to mean a scoundrel or, better still perhaps, a subaltern—at any rate, a person of unremarkable social pedigree, unpretentious, certainly not among the movers and shakers of society. Fiji Lal, an aptly named *dauka*, is the central character of the novel. He was born around the 1930s when the memory of indenture was still fresh in people's minds, in a small village on the outskirts of the town, near the sugar mill on the Qawa River, perhaps in a village like Batinikama where