Reviews

Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians. By Brij V. Lal. *The Journal of Pacific History* (Canberra), VIII, (1983), 152 pp. Index, appendices, maps, tables, illus., notes. Price: Aust. $9.75.

THIS MONOGRAPH, based on Brij Lal's doctoral thesis, examines the background of Fiji's *girmitiyas* (the indentured labourers who signed an agreement or *girmit*). The study makes several important contributions to Fijian, Pacific and Indian history. For Fijian history it provides a detailed analysis of the social and economic background of a major sector of the nation's population. More significantly Lal has made a real attempt to correct the derogatory image of the indentured Indian migrants in Fiji, and to restore dignity to the descendants of the *girmitiyas*, who too often have been ashamed of their past. Nevertheless, the approach is neither sentimental nor superficial but rather based upon solid quantitative evidence. In this respect the study makes another major contribution, particularly to the development of Pacific history. Few historians in this field have explored the possibilities of handling copious amounts of data through the use of a computer. While much of Lal's discussion does turn to documentary evidence and occasionally oral evidence, such as folk tales, the bulk of his investigation involved the analysis of 45,439 emigration passes of *girmitiyas* from Northern India.

The author has attempted to revise the view espoused by Hugh Tinker and others that Indians were helpless victims of a 'new system of slavery'. Lal (p.129) does not deny that there were instances of deception and abuse against the migrants but stresses that: 'Seen in the context of the nineteenth century and of other types of labour migration from other countries such as China, it has to be admitted that tragic and sensational as the cases of deception in Indian migration were, there was nothing really exceptional about them.' By tracing through some of the important steps in the recruitment process and placing it in the socio-economic context of that time he smashes a number of myths which are still swallowed by many people both within and outside Fiji today. The same critical revision has been applied in his excellent chapters covering women and families.

Some of the myths that have been carefully examined and revised surround the role of the *arkatis* or recruiters who have long been held up, both in popular and academic testimony, as the evil men responsible for duping gullible Indian peasants. Lal (p.24) chooses to emphasise wider socio-economic forces behind emigration and also notes that the *arkatis* were probably afraid of entering villages for fear of being attacked by the servants of the *zamindars*. He found few cases of fraud instigated by the *arkatis* and suggests that there was little need for forcible recruitment. During years of scarcity and famine large numbers of peasants were especially prone to seek some alternative means of livelihood. Con-

siderable detail is given of the plight which small landholders, petty cultivators, landless labourers and artisans faced as a result of economic hardship due to changes in land ownership, land fragmentation, the lack of rural credit, revenue and rent demands, and the decline of many traditional industries. These were only some of the consequences of the 'ultimate subordination of the economic interests of India to those of Britain' (p.74).

Thus it is of little surprise that, due to the pervasiveness of economic disruption in northern India during this period, the *girmitiyas*, according to Lal's evidence, originated from a cross-section of rural northern Indian society. This is a definite blow to the negative stereotype of the low-caste background of the *girmitiyas*. Because all strata of Indian society were adversely affected by British economic and political penetration it meant that not only lower but also higher castes frequently sought employment outside their home regions and in non-traditional occupations.

A further widely-held image is that these migrants suffered immediate and irreparable cultural disruption once they left India. It is refreshing to read a appraisal which, while suggesting that there was not an abrupt disintegration of cultural values, points to the positive aspects of the forging of a new life which cut through religion, caste and place of origin.

The last two chapters covering women and families perhaps provide the most refreshing and stimulating social data in this study. They also raise many questions deserving future attention, particularly the evidence concerning families. Lal has dismantled the myth of the 'depot family', that is an ill-matched assemblage of people from mixed caste and village origins. Instead, he demonstrates that most families have migrated from villages in units, especially during years of severe economic hardship. The analysis of female *girmitiyas* provides one of the few published accounts which dispels the notion that these women were either helpless victims or cunning and disreputable. While the author has not denied that women certainly were susceptible to physical and mental coercion during the recruitment and indenture process, he emphasises that the tendency to dwell on the sensational cases was part of the overall campaign to abolish indenture. Many of these women had powerful reasons for emigrating 'of their own volition to escape the drudgery and degradation of Indian life' (p.98). Evidence from the emigration passes indicates that, like all *girmitiyas*, these women originated from a variety of backgrounds.

The questions and conclusions that can be drawn from this study demonstrate that historians must address themselves to the evidence, particularly when examining social and economic issues, in order to break through myths commonly held by academics and the general public alike. It is essential, Lal believes, to consider *girmit* within the context of developments in India and colonial political and economic interests of the time. One issue which raises some questions concerning Lal's analysis, however, is the validity of the data entered on the emigration passes. Lal notes cases of falsification, but does not evaluate its extent. One can see the problems in striving to meet a balance between providing solid documentation and writing a work that interests, yet can be understood by, the general public. The comprehensive discussion of the Indian background and tables are of considerable value to the specialist but readers without much understanding of Indian history may find this detail overwhelming. A glossary would have been a welcome addition.

Aside from such minor criticisms it is to be hoped that this monograph will set

the pace of future studies of societies within the Pacific and particularly of the Indo-Fijians. Much of the historiography pertaining to this group still perpetuates a negative image of life on the plantations and implies tremendous social disruption. It is still a common assuption that certain individuals were responsible for this and political and economic dimensions are commonly not considered as they have been by Lal. The history of Indo-Fijians is indeed far richer and more complex than a history of merely passive victims. Lal has, however, only analysed their background and there are many subsequent aspects of Indo-Fijian history open for similar careful scrutiny and re-evaluation.

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Counterpoint in Maori Culture. By F. Allan Hanson and Louise Hanson. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1983, 232 pp. illus. Price: U.K. £17.50.

IN THESE days of structural histories, of praxis interacting with cultural reason, this book offers a promise but fails to deliver a totally satisfying response. The author's stated aim (p.8) is 'to describe the forms or templates which Maoris used to conceptualize history, be it the work of the gods as the world took shape, the doings of their ancestors as they colonized New Zealand, or the patterns of development which Maoris anticipated in cordial or hostile relationships among individuals and groups or between humans and the gods'. Using a rather idiosyncratic semiotic scheme wherein a syntagm is defined as the formal structure of a conventional sequence of elements, the authors claim at the outset that two basic syntagms or developmental sequences can encompass all of this 'history'.

The three chapters of Part One explore the syntagm of complementarity which operates by emphasizing the differences between entities as they unite, produce something new, then separate. The complementary structure of sexual union, whether of gods or men, provides the archetype for this syntagm, but many examples are presented of the way in which this pattern served as a template for a diversity of Maori ideas about human behaviour, from relations between parent and child to relations of mind and body. In the course of this explanation, the reader gains some valuable insights into the operation of the concept of *tapu* which is interpreted convincingly as simply being 'under the influence of *atua*' (p.50). Indeed, almost all relationships between the human and the divine are shown to follow the complementary syntagm.

The four chapters of Part Two deal with the other basic syntagm, that of symmetry, starting with the cordial reciprocity of gift-exchange between equals but moving quickly to conflict and the hostile exchanges of warfare. Apart from the conceptualization of human history, the pattern of symmetry followed by separation was also used extensively as a template for natural history, explaining the particular habits and habitats of plants and animals and the distribution of geographical features.

While accepting that these formulations of symmetrical and complementary