

## **Gender issues in education, Culture and Health.**

The Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) October 26<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> 2010  
Conference in London.

The National Liberal Club, Whitehall Place.  
27<sup>th</sup> October 2010.

Indians were taken to colonies in the British West Indies, in the latter half of the 19thC, to halt the rapid decline of the sugar monoculture there. They came with a complex, comprehensive culture intact: a spoken and written language, food preparation rituals, their religion with its many festivals; music and dance; birth, marriage and death ceremonies, as well as an established hierarchy of people and things.

With emigration, however, came the opportunity to cast off aspects of tradition like the caste system which was debilitating and impeded human progress. The possibilities to be upwardly mobile were now opened to them, more so **in Guyana and Trinidad where the land and other natural resources per capita, were significantly higher than those in India.**

One of the most pitiful and harmful aspect of Indian Culture, from which they were unable to extricate themselves for a very long time was a neglect of the education of women and concern for their welfare. These aspects of life were not perceived as the way forward for the family, by fathers and later by husbands and in-laws. The tradition they brought which had served them well and with which they tied their identity, was held on to, with the tenacity of a people who felt threatened by their lack of power in an alien, harsh environment.

Husbands, in-Laws, and even their children often took advantage of this. **So wretched were their lives that many Indian women defied the laws of nature and died before their men folk.** Being house bound and illiterate had enormous long term, dire consequences. It meant they were not exposed to the thinking of other women, from other cultures. They were living in the Western hemisphere, but because their culture was an all encompassing one, satisfying parents, husband and children, they were unaware, of the pressing need to become literate in English, in order to understand the expanding, changing world of progressive ideas as modernity marched through North America and Western Europe.

The role of the Suffragettes in changing the perception of women, in the 1920.s in England, and even before that, **the Enlightenment culture, with its belief in the expansion of knowledge, the application of reason and logic and the dedication to scientific methods passed them by.**

This combination of being house bound coupled with the denial of universal primary education, resulted in the majority of Indo Caribbean women in Trinidad and Guyana being left behind for the better part of two generations. The consequences of such thinking are seen in the paucity of Indo Caribbean women, relative to the population, in the upper echelons of the Civil Service and professions. This was especially so as late as the 1950's. **It also left our women with a predisposition to avoid positions that would propel them on to a public platform, or to grasp the concept of the moral worth of the individual, known as Individualism which stresses that the quality of each person is unique and that his or her interests and capabilities should not be impeded by society, family, groups or institutions.**

As women became more assertive, however, and fathers could see the pecuniary and marital advantages that came with education, the once closed pattern became an open, ever expanding one of possibilities. It is true to say that today Indo Caribbean women are taking full advantage of primary and secondary schools, national and regional universities. They, like many women of Indian origin in the Diaspora, have entered a wide field of endeavour; a few

have attained the pinnacle of their profession and **today Trinidad proudly claims a woman prime minister of Indian origin.**

Nevertheless there are places in South Trinidad and also pockets deep in the countryside in Guyana where illiteracy is still present amongst far too many Indo Caribbean women. Also, it is a world wide phenomenon that most female employment cluster at the lower end of the skill ladder. It is a shame that a significant percentage of children in India and elsewhere are not receiving a sound primary school education, the very foundation of a good life. It cannot be beyond India's capabilities, or that of the Caribbean, to end this pitiful state of affairs.

A good education is essential to the development of women; it forms the basis for all other aspects of development we are here concerned with, be it marital, industrial, legal, cultural and health issues.

However, worldwide experience shows **that education per se, is not enough**, for after acquiring qualifications that are even higher than those of men, when they start together on similar jobs at the same salary, within a decade of employment or less, women become less equal than men who are by then enjoying a bigger pay packet, higher hourly wages, and a greater upward mobility. A recent survey shows that only 3% of the executives in the Fortune 500 are women. Why does this pattern persists worldwide, even to those in wealthy democracies?

**The answer lies in the fact that women have to choose when they are married between their family and a career; men do not. Men are able, from early in their career to work longer hours, at flexible times; they give their undivided attention to their career. This means they are perceived as more reliable and dependable.**

After a full day with the firm, a woman hurries home, to allow her domestic help to leave for her own home. She will then engage with her children, bath them, offer them supper, listen to the events of their day, probing gently if any of her dear little ones appear out of sorts, to discover the cause, then read to them at bed time and wish them sweet dreams with hugs so offering her children a daily reassurance that they are much loved. It is a shame that this valuable connection with their children, more often than not falls entirely to the women.

On the other hand, after work, men are building up relationships with their colleagues in the pub, in the gentleman's club, and at weekends in the golf course. **This is called vertical networking. It is well known that professional networks are more often built, outside working hours. Such activities play their part in men's upward mobility.**

I have already said that education is essential to the development of women. But what do I mean by education?

Today, one is deemed to be educated having acquired only the knowledge and training to practise a vocation, or a specific job. **To be truly educated, however, is to have acquired in addition, a more profound understanding of what is before you. This means the ability to judge persons and situations fairly, based on a moral code of approved behaviour, to discern, to analyse, to think outside the box presented by the culture of the workplace and that of the home.**

Do we continue into the future with this large disparity in opportunities for women at the work place? Here is a vivid example of the challenging nature of what the future holds and why treating women more fairly is vital to progress, to civilisation itself. **Bob Sherwood in an article named Cultural exchange in this autumn's RSA Journal says: "In the past year we have seen a UK Law firm acting for the Chinese buyers of a Swedish carmaker from US sellers."**

Observe that such a complex cross border deal entailing four major commercial cultures was enabled by the ability, to grasp the subtle nuances of all four countries, and to negotiate smoothly through several regulatory challenges, in order to forge a mutually beneficial agreement.

Since this is but a small example of the nature of the challenges of the future, why are we neglecting to utilise the mental agility of half of our very able population?

**Neither should it be beyond the ability of governments acting in unison with firms, to devise a structure and work pattern to solve one of society's thorniest problems—gender inequalities of opportunities at the work place.** Why shouldn't child rearing be shared? It will be beneficial to the child and to both his parents. Why should women's most valuable offering to our civilisation— producing well balanced, thoughtful, happy citizens of tomorrow—so disadvantage them that mothers must suffer a widening gap in pay and prestige? Is it fair? **Should this unfair system, be the foundation of our moral compass?** Be the direction in which our future civilisation moves? Let us make a start by being fair to women.

**Finally, I am hoping that in good time, there would be an expanding concept of Indianess and that many outside the present definition of GOPIO would feel the all encompassing humanity of what I perceive as Indianess. For as one of India's finest sons Amartya Sen has said, "Identity, even self-imposed is a reduction of freedom."**

Dr Lakshmi Persaud  
27<sup>th</sup> October 2010