

Indo-Caribbean Cultural Inheritance, Help or Hindrance?

by

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In an attempt to answer the question the essay poses, I shall first look at the socio-political situation mainly in Trinidad, though in Guyana, it is not dissimilar and it is in these two countries that Indo Caribbean cultural inheritance is visible.

In a world that is rapidly becoming globalized, peoples of different races, cultures and religions would have to learn to live together far more amicably than is presently happening in many countries. It is something worth working towards for our lives are enhanced by the cultural richness that comes with variety.

In order that a society may be enhanced by these differences of race and culture, governments have to pay particular attention to ensure that all arms of democratic governance are operating justly and fairly at all times.

However, when race, prejudices, incompetence and a failing judiciary become common experiences, differences are further exacerbated, leading eventually to a dysfunctional democracy, a stagnating society and an unstable, unsustainable one.

The island of Barbados has no natural resource except for its beautiful coral beaches; not far away the island of Trinidad has an abundance of oil and gas resources; the soil is volcanic, rich and deep and yet it is from here that many of its citizens are emigrating, and many more have a pressing need to be the possessor of a Canadian or American passport and will do whatever it takes to acquire one, for to have one is to have a passport to a future life for their children and themselves. Often when the young leave to further improve their qualifications, they do not return.

Meanwhile, in Barbados, so well is it governed that in recent times wealthy foreigners, who can choose to live anywhere, wish to live there. The Human Development Index, a much broader development index than the GDP is significantly higher than that in Trinidad. Barbados' GDP is also higher than that of Trinidad's.

Why should this be? Is it that in the case of Trinidad, race has been allowed to play too large a part in its society? Is it also because we do not have in Trinidad or the wider English speaking Caribbean, sufficient independent thinkers who could have helped to keep governments from their excesses, instead of reinforcing their foolhardy, unsustainable policies, motivated by the desire to hold on to their racial and cultural privileges and power.

Racial suspicions and fears encouraged by politicians, have led to a profound and all encompassing deleterious social and political situation. This is seen in the animosities between Afro and Indo Peoples, especially in Guyana during the period 1962 when parts of Georgetown were burnt down, in May 1964, when the Wismar massacres occurred and the twenty four year dictatorship period of 1968-1992 made possible by blatantly rigged elections. It was a pity that the Caribbean looked on and sadly it took an outsider, past President Carter to bring an end to election fraud.

So appalling has the security situation become in Trinidad that its President, George Maxwell Richards, has publicly acknowledged that Trinidad is a backward country. When one considers that the PNM party was in government from Independence in 1962 to the present, except for two periods 1986-1991 and 1996-2001, its 36 year legacy shows a complete lack of understanding that the future growth and prosperity of a country must lie not on building sky scrapers, or government's largesse to its supporters but on a strong bedrock of security, and justice for all— hence on the Rule of Law.

The 2007 report of the International human Rights organisation, Amnesty international, points out, the President's observation, there is, I quote from the report: "unlawful killings by state agents and a continued pattern of impunity for such killings.... Only once, since the country's independence in 1962 has a police officer been convicted for murder while on duty.... It was in 2004, for the murder of Kevin Cato by police constable Dave Burnett..... To date.... there has been little progress in the investigation into 37 cases of alleged killings by state agents, committed since September 2003. Intimidation of witnesses has been widely reported. In 2006 there were 368 murders. Conviction rates continue to be very low." Official statistics from the Police Service's Crime and Problems Analysis (CAPA) show that there has been 226 homicides from Jan 1st to June 11th this year— 2008, compared with 125 for the same period last year—2007.

The 2007 Amnesty Report reflects that in the absence of due judicial process, and a very low conviction rate, crime pays. This has led to violent drug related crimes occurring daily among our youth; kidnappings and the murder of children and adults are rife. Kidnapping, largely racially targeted in its early manifestations and still predominantly so, was glossed over at its first stirrings, by the urbanised middle class over a decade ago and by those who could have severely curtailed it. So profitable is it, so incompetent the police force, that not only amateurs are trying their hand at it but more recently, school children and young women too. The drug barons and their associated gangs also, have since gained in confidence and strength. Now a numbness of feeling holds the society while a poverty of culture and empathy dominates the thinking.

No one is safe. Past presidents and cabinet ministers as well as Trinidad's wealthiest elites comprising of Syrians, Lebanese, French Creole and those who can afford to do so, live in gated communities, while the majority of citizens live vulnerable lives outside these closed gates as criminals decide whose life to take or whose life's efforts to feast upon, and gangs plan their next attack.

Over the years, the politicisation of the arms of the state and with it the levers of democratic governance, such as the civil service, the judiciary, the police force and the media has meant, that democracy itself, has become dysfunctional and so governments ill equipped to govern are allowed to remain in power by racial demographics or electoral boundary gerrymandering, long after their sell-by date.

This desperate, ugly, stagnating situation has been allowed to fester so long because the main conduit to jobs, positions, business contracts , and government scholarships has been, not meritocracy but instead—race, party affiliation, and who you know. Small countries in particular must use all the able bodied, capable and qualified men and women they have, irrespective of race, or gender, for to continue to use the present indulgent, wasteful, ineffective route, unrelated to competence, is to be sliding down a perilous one, as Guyana and Trinidad clearly show.

Cultural liberty and evolution are vital parts of human development, because they enable one to choose one's identity, to define one's self and to lead a full life. Unfortunately, there has long been a strong, pressing desire to marginalise and stifle the cultural heritage of Indo Trinidadians and Indo Guyanese.

Trinidadian and Guyanese governments, the colonial elites and intellectuals, have used their leverages of communication, covertly and overtly to direct the thinking of all citizens as to what the preferred national culture is, so denying genuine multiculturalism its rightful place.

A large proportion of citizens continues to find their Indo cultural heritage sustainable and of enduring worth. From where did their remarkable resilience initially come? And why all citizens now seem to have lost the best practices of their respective cultures?

The forefathers of our Indo Caribbean population came with a culture that enabled them to live and work successfully and to grow; over the years, as the quality of their lives slowly improved, they were able to draw on the sophisticated, all encompassing ancient culture of India.

What is culture? All cultures are an acculturation of knowledge and values which give life its purpose and meaning, its shape, direction and goals to a people at anyone time and place. And so when they arrived, they came with a philosophy of life – Hinduism and Islam and had the skills to build their own homes, their cooker, the chulha. They knew the art of growing rice and vegetables complete with a machan for vegetables on vines. The first indigenous, export industry, the rice industry of Guyana is their handiwork. The making of beautiful gold jewellery and their craft of exquisite filigree workmanship expanded. In Guyana this local industry grew substantially to become an export industry. However, the “choke and rob” culture there, has led to the demise of the home market. They kept cows and soon, were in market gardening, selling their surplus in urban markets.

The more talented amongst them shared what they knew and the community quickly grasped the art of cooking the most sensuous, delicious food the world knows; the art of massage— anointing the limbs of babies from birth was passed on. There was too, the art of meditation, as well as the celebration of the important ceremonies of life: that of birth and the grand, colourful rich meaning of marriage. The moving death ceremony of the body being embalmed with herbs, sweet scented spices, flowers and sugar crystals, then to have the pyre circled by lighted torches before it is lit at all four corners by close relatives were all faithfully kept. They found many an uplifting lesson from two of the world’s great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as from their pujas and kathas; the narrating of the Ramayana at nights in song and poetry for an entire month by the pundit and later its grand costumed play called Ramleela all helped to give a cohesiveness to the community. In his Nobel Laureate lecture, one of our Nobel Prize winners gave Ramleela pride of place. I refer to Derek Walcott. There were other celebrations: the birth of Shiva, Shivratri, the spring festival of Holi and the festival of lights Divali. There were also chants and the sacred music of an old civilisation. The Moslems brought the Koran and its associated culture of fasting and prayer and built their beautiful mosques.

But this culture, well outside its source environment and very much on its own, had to face the devastating impacts of its time and place.

Firstly, Muscular, dogmatic Christian missionaries of the latter half of the 19thC and first half of 20th C. brought a package of: Christianity, its sophistry, a much needed primary and secondary education and teaching jobs. Unfortunately it was so judgemental of the non proselytizing Hindus, and of Moslems, portraying them as heathens on the road to damnation for all eternity, that many of the newly converted would have denied their very DNA if they could, fortunately there were those who were able to continue to embrace their past with affection and a valued intimacy.

Secondly, in Guyana, Dr Cheddi Jagan’s marxism, with its ideological antagonism to religions and their cultural manifestations, fell particularly sharply on Hinduism and Islam – the faiths of most of his supporters. Their offspring formed the party’s youth movement and

were actively subjected to marxist indoctrination. This further exacerbated the disadvantage these cultures faced in a society where Christianity, in reality, already had establishment status.

Thirdly not fully cognizant that the newly emerging urban societies of the 20th C required new skills and understanding, they were late comers to primary and secondary education.

Fourthly, this new thinking required them to uproot themselves, leaving their poorly serviced village communities where a common occupation, bonds of culture and shared values, had given them a sense of belonging, to finding a place in the better serviced towns and their suburbs with well equipped schools and teaching, library facilities, doctors and dentists. Here families were on their own, in an unfamiliar environment coping with an unknown that made them vulnerable to those who perceived them as a threat.

Fifthly they met with the prejudices, and ridicule that new comers encounter as they move from their former homes to places occupied by others. Urban Afro Trinidadians having long left the land and armed

with what was referred to as an Afro-Saxon culture picked up the comfortable mantles of omniscience and intellectual imperialism left by the colonists. These mantles were also worn by Christian missionaries. This combined disparaging attitude from the ruling elite and missionaries to the rapidly urbanizing other, was held steadfast, and far longer than the new changing reality justified.

Sixthly and here lies the rub, by having better access to independent professions that help a society to cope with the stresses of life, such as medicine, law and accountancy, has meant that Indo Caribbean peoples neglected the arts and social sciences and with it, the means of communicating cogently. As a result, they have tended to be inarticulate, unable to express themselves clearly and effectively both by the written and spoken word. This has greatly handicapped them, for they were unable to make an honourable case for themselves or for others when that was necessary or to defend themselves or others against unjust and unfair treatment by civil servants and the police.

Were they so equipped, they would have helped to form, a more viable and effective government or when in opposition, helping to seek a greater transparency and accountability to the electorate. The Trinidad government's grave, intolerable lapses, in not providing a wholesome security for all its citizens, would not have been allowed to persist for so long, was there an effective opposition comprising all sections of the society.

The culture of Trinidadians has become one of crippling anxieties, pending deaths and cruel extortions of money. Weeping over the brutally murdered bodies of their children, brothers, fathers, mothers and sisters, is a daily occurrence. Not all the bodies of kidnapped victims have been found one of those being ten-year-old Vijay Persad snatched from his home on June 21st 2004. It is time to ask what is the foundation of this culture of crime and unaccountability and whether there is a direct connection between racism, political interference and incompetence in all institutions, as well as personal ambitions of politicians, corruption, waste of resources, and an ineffective system of justice.

I endeavour to speak for the vulnerable in our midst. I refer to our Afro and Indo Youths who are wasting their lives and the many victims of murders and kidnappings whom the state has failed, as well as those who could find no sanctuary in the society and paid with their lives.

We are all descendants of a harsh and cruel servitude; we know we can do better than this. Our resources both human and natural are enormous, let us Trinidadians and Guyanese use

our skills to create new, progressive, far more inclusive societies where every race and creed have a genuine, equal place and not a say so one.

At birth, as babies we are wrapped in the comforts of the cultural heritage of our forefathers; as we grow, we quickly realise that several aspects of many cultures have long been our heritage. We see this by how we make use of anything we desire or need, irrespective of which culture has invented it or discovered it, be it medicines, laws, a system of organisation and of operation, humane concepts or air travel. We are a very young nation, we need to choose the best from far and wide, why try to stifle each other?

Let us keep alive, what is beautiful, of worth and of value that are present in our cultures of birth, so that the world can partake of them and be further enriched, in much the same way, we are too, by all cultures.

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