

The Beauty and Strength of the Human Spirit

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On the Celebration of Trinidad's Indian arrival Day,

30 May 2004, London.

Called to save the island's economy

Today, May 30th 2004 at Kingsley Hall, London E3, we celebrate the arrival from the East to the West of courageous men and women who brought with them a culture, complete in its entirety, catering to man's spiritual and physical needs.

This way of life has made substantial contributions to the still evolving society of Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica as well as to the English speaking Caribbean.

So sustaining was this art of living, to growth in India that its population exploded in numbers and produced a multitude of beautiful and enchanting ways of doing things and perceiving things. It is a sophisticated culture thousands of years old, one that has asked the larger questions of life and responded with the great religions of the world --- Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism. The latter is being enthusiastically embraced by the West.

With the coming of violent raids in Northern India by the Muslim Turks in the tenth Century A.D. and later with their settling in its vast fertile plains, came another sophisticated life style which was assimilated in India, a sub-continent with the ability to integrate and seduce all comers --- imperialist, invaders, immigrants, refugees, and travellers who have contributed greatly to the enrichment of its inheritance. With the arrival of our forefathers, this vast, complex, cultural largesse has become part of the inheritance of the Caribbean.

It was 159 years ago, that our forefathers first brought this way of living with them on the Fatel Rozack which landed in Trinidad on May 30th 1845, They came not as slaves but as agricultural labourers— indentured for a period of five years, by the colonial power, to halt the fast collapsing sugar industry, the mainstay of the West Indian economy.

So harsh were the conditions and so small the wages that men, newly emancipated from servitude were not attracted to it. For the indentured labourers, it was a period of great hardship and with far too few indentured women, a time of disorientation, fear, mistrust, wife beatings, killings and alcoholism. Thousands of these agricultural labourers opted to return to India after the expiry of their contract.

Those who remained, harnessed themselves to hard work and at great personal sacrifices, saved the economy from collapsing, helped to put it on a sound footing and later, contributed in no small measure to the social stability and growth of those British West Indian colonies which became their homes.

Ladies and gentlemen, here in the West, our forefathers faced much hostility and the undermining of their culture from an arrogant, domineering, colonial power with its authoritarian religion that carried the savagery of certitude in one hand and schools in the other. It was the latter contribution that played

a large role in giving the children of Indian descent an education that greatly enabled them to improve their socio-economic prospects.

Today we give much thanks to all government schools and church schools but it is to the early Canadian Presbyterian mission that our largest bouquets are sent. Much later, by the 1940's/50's, came Maha Sabha schools and they went much further. They widened the catchment area of educational opportunities to the growing numbers of young Indo-Trinidadians. Children from the humblest homes in far away muddy, country lanes now walked to schools, in the knowledge, that their teachers identified with their songs and prayers, ceremonies and celebrations.

Our government permits an ugliness to spawn

However, it is painful to have to acknowledge, that though education equipped us to rise in society, we and our forefathers, have had to cope both before and after political Independence, with a bold, institutional racism that sought to reduce us – to demean us. This unnamed policy was exercised in our schools, in our ever expanding civil service, when we sought jobs, or well earned promotion and in the granting of national honours. This ugliness seeped into the air around us –an unwritten understanding -- that we should be sidelined.

It is most unfortunate that the vibrancy of this unwholesome thinking has spawned a perilous path— kidnapping innocent men and their young children. Kidnappers have been so successful in gaining from this crime that kidnapping is perceived as a profitable Industry in Trinidad; so ineffective the police have been in catching these criminals that of late, a few amateurs –factory workers— decided to enrich themselves by kidnapping their employer's child.

However, today, we, inheritors of 159 years of our forefathers' endeavours give thanks to their good luck in leaving a society with social rigidities of class and caste and their coming to a younger, more open one.

This openness comes from our society being youthful, flexible and transparent. Neither should we forget that the British left us with the tools of good governance which have helped to encourage the maintenance of our democratic inheritance. Our open society is also a result of our close proximity to America as well as our sharing an open, expressive culture from Africa which to this day, remains a continent with people of enormous human warmth, good will and an eagerness to re-asses the old understandings and to learn new ones. We celebrate all contributors to our open society.

Today we also remind ourselves of our contribution to the culture of Trinidad with our food, music and dance, elegant, attractive clothes and singing colours, epics and philosophies that enchant the spirit of man.

Jhandis

We celebrate our heritage that is life giving and joyous, one that can fill the sky line with colour --- by using our Jhandis (colourful weaves of cotton on tall bamboo poles) to hail loudly, the concepts of the god of learning and knowledge, of light or enlightenment, of prosperity. But as time erodes our Jhandis and they fall to the ground we should be reminded that our stay too, is temporary, and that our abiding legacy should be what our Jhandis reflect: that we should do unto others as we would have others do unto us.

Our laughing Jhandis, dancing in the wind should also remind us that we need moments of reflection to revitalise ourselves, to enrich the purpose of our gift of life.

We Celebrate

We celebrate the magic of massala, that fine balance of spices and herbs that transforms the humblest meal into a delight, enabling eyes and lips to smile, while silencing, grumbling stomachs of men and women from all continents.

We celebrate a culture that provides us with skilled craftsmen of delicate gold and silver jewellery which warms and adorns our bodies.

We celebrate a philosophy of living that will not condone pre-emptive strikes, but which instead offers Satyagraha -- peaceful resistance --- and the sophisticated art of diplomacy. We celebrate a culture that gives thanks, and respects all life on our planet and the wider cosmos.

We celebrate the inheritance of a philosophy that says there are many routes to the good life, yours and mine and theirs.

We celebrate a way of thinking that acknowledges — ‘not knowing’ is intrinsic to life, a way of thinking that is aware of man’s inherent limitations to ‘being all knowing’ and so instead of running with a righteous certainty to all, offers a pathway of caution, tolerance and courtesy in its own understanding of the unknown.

To our Shame

But only a vacant mind will today refuse to heed the historical fact that the racist ugliness I have already alluded to, was also present in our neighbourhood—Guyana—one of our Caricom sisters. The spirit of the ruthless, racist thinking of the late Forbes Burnham of Guyana has left that country in a parlous state. He was a Prime Minister who gave himself a title—President for Life. He was also able to change the very constitution, inherited from the British, to give himself a still greater power without any accountability to parliament or the country, so creating an authoritarian regime supreme.

To our shame, the government of Trinidad and Tobago, comforted him with loans – and our Caricom sisters as well as our highest seat of learning, our University of the West Indies, also embraced him warmly, uncritical of his racist governance. It is this and the present institutional racism in Trinidad which combine to make our celebration today, a cautious one.

Our government is there to protect all its citizens. The safety of all Trinidadians, irrespective of their creed or race must be its first priority. It will be a sad day indeed, when our national anthem becomes an empty song and Trinidadians living abroad are safer under foreign skies, than under those where their cradles were rocked.

Let us not transform a land so blessed with large resources, to one, where the cries of foul play, of racism, of corruption, go unheeded by our intellectuals, our advocates of the rule of law, our religious bodies, our university, human rights organisations, government and people.

An ancient epic with a post-modern theme

Ladies and gentlemen we pay homage to our forefathers, parents and grandparents who brought this sustaining culture with them and held it through dark and difficult times, enriching the society of Trinidad.

It is time to remind ourselves what lies at the core of that great world epic the Mahabharata. When Arjun said to Krishna that he could not and would not aim his arrow at his cousins, long standing friends and those persons revered by society, Krishna asked him why were they on the other side of this battle field-- supporting with all their resources and will power, what was evil, unjust and barbaric?

So let us judge men neither by their race nor creed, nor family connections but by their individual actions, what they stand for, what they would fight against.

We acknowledge and give thanks

Today we acknowledge and give thanks to that beautiful human spirit which resides in men far and wide. I have found this spirit amongst men and women in Barbados, in Jamaica, in Trinidad, in India, in the Americas, in Africa and in Asia.

We acknowledge the beauty and strength of the spirit of all our mothers and fathers, Agees and Nanees, Ajahs and Nanas, courageous, compassionate and dauntless they were in the face of overwhelming odds.

We hail the great Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and let us not forget the courage of that fine spirit found in Captain Swinton and his caring wife Mrs Swinton who were on board the Salsette on that fatal journey. The Salsette left Calcutta on 17th March 1858 with 324 Indian emigrants and arrived in Trinidad on July 2 nd. Sadly, 124 had died at sea.

We acknowledge with thanks the lives of the Swintons, for it was their day to day account of the plight of these men and women, full of hope for the betterment of themselves, yet fearful and doubtful of their destination, that led to an improvement of conditions on later ships, so enabling many of us to be sitting here today.

Let us remember those beautiful words of our forefathers, born from the womb of shared struggle and endurance --- Jhaji bhai – meaning the brotherhood of the ship, for we are all Jhaji bhai --travellers in the night, our footsteps in the dark.

Today we give thanks and celebrate what is good in all Trinidadians, may it increase a thousand fold for therein lies the prosperity of this island and all its peoples.

Now, let us fill our mouths with the sheer delights of rasmaila, gulabjamoon, pateesa, para, and warm kheer. Let us hold hands with our fellow Trinidadians for they are part of us and we of them, though many, may yet not know it.

I end with Walt Whitman's Song which is what I have tried to say.

“I celebrate myself and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

Ladies and gentlemen thank you for listening, thank you for being here.