ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA
Office for the Caribbean

COMMENTS

on

"EAST INDIANS in the CARIBBEAN -
A Symposium on Contemporary Economic and Political Issues"
(Trinidad - 25 to 28 June 1975)

Prepared
by
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Comments

on

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A Symposium on Contemporary Economics and
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This symposium is my first contact with an organized group of Caribbean scholars. It deals with a specific subject matter of which I have very few reading background and personal experiences. These notes are therefore very general. Few comments are made on the content of the papers; mainly methodological problems and dialogues between the speakers and the audience are focused. It must be added that owing to certain problems of organization, the set of reports was not available for all participants - I am due to receive them at a later date. Most remarks are drawn from verbal presentations - always schematical - and discussions provoked by them.

2. There were two public sessions. A "feature address" by V. Naipaul and a Panel discussion on "Challenge and Change: East Indians in the Caribbean". Members of the panel were all from East Indian origin.

Naipaul's address was an abstract and highly sophisticated presentation. His 'parables' were appreciated by most members of the Faculty and during subsequent sessions reference was often made to his words. Nonetheless the public and the press disliked "Naipaul's behaviour". It has been said that he did not answer the questions raised by the audience, while most of the time the novelist would ask to the public: "Why do you want me to repeat my address?"

Scholars from Trinidad and Guyana presented different themes during the Panel discussion. Their brief interventions were political statements on possible "ways out" of discrimination against East Indians. Only one scholar, stated clearly that he was opposed to
any search of political power on a racial basis. The position of the Guyanese speakers was both emotional and race-oriented.

3. The impression from these two public sessions are:

a) Both major ethnic groups of the country (T & T) were well represented among the audience, even though "Indo-Trinidadians" outnumbered "Afro-Trinidadians". This audience, formed probably by university people, students, professionals and activists, had in general rather definite points of view on the racial conflict and ways to solve it. It was its hope to confront them with the "Academy".

b) During the opening session the public was more heterogeneous. Naipaul did not want or could not be clear and specific, in view - I guess - of possible repercussions of any concrete statement he would have made, and the usual misinterpretation. He chose not to be understood; and refused flatly to be a leader (political leader or opinion maker).

c) During the closing session, one has the impression that the public was less race-oriented than the panelists, that it was looking for some explanation beyond the "race" variable. At the end, the race issue became secondary and the Guyanese group had to remain silent.

d) It seems that instead of proposing to the public, concepts built up in the academic environment, the panelists -
but one - took common sense ideas "to please the public", and found themselves at the end in a political void, since the audience was seeing politics in a larger scope, criticising the "ethnic politics" and raising class oriented issues. This seems a very important development. The role of the sugar-cane workers' leader in this trend must be underlined.

e) In conclusion, as usual the scholars were in their ivory tower. They either refused to get out of it (Naipaul), or trying to do so, they fell into the moat (the panelists).

Submissions to the Symposium

The papers presented covered a wide range of interesting topics, related to inter-ethnic relations, social mobility, migration, history, social anthropology, physical anthropology, International relations ... There were no distribution of scholars along racial lines, even though it has not been noticed any Afro or White-Guyanese scholar.

A special place must be given to Mr. S. Basdeo's (Dalhousie University) research on labour relations in Trinidad & Tobago.

The following observations can be made:

a) Most of the papers were drawn from current research or published thesis, generally elaborated according to a behaviourist approach.

b) Due to the relevance of the issues in the present-day political conflicts, it was difficult for the scholars to stay clear from "trivial" definitions.
c) The general approach being highly empiristic, there was no framework to help assuming ever present quests for ethnic pride or ethnic identity. One stayed with two question marks: Is "Indian" culture relevant in the ideological structure of West Indian societies? Or is it only the quest for ethnic identity that is modifying political practices? In this respect, it has been impossible to manage two or three operational definitions of the word culture.

d) Most confusion was also due to the use of the word "race". The only physical anthropologist invited to the symposium, Ken Tracey, made an interesting mise au point, few people seem to have even heard, because he tried to convince not to explain his standpoints. It was remarkable to see that, talking on race relations in Trinidad & Tobago, the scholar displayed a large knowledge of negroid races, and seems to have less information on "Indian" groups.

e) Several scholars, most of them working in Trinidad & Tobago, gave a show of knowledge about the Indian background, but it is to be pointed out, that they were Indo-Trinidadians or Indians. Few Afro-Trinidadian scholars worked on Indian matters (if any at all), and few Indo-Trinidadian scholars on African matters (if any at all). This situation left the door wide open to political activists entering the debates with admirable enthusiasm, courage and romanticism, but very poor theoretical support. Nonetheless, the ethnic composition of the audience seems to indicate a thirst for cross-information, which symposia of the like can help to diffuse.
f) In such a behaviourist atmosphere, some comparative studies would have been of help. There were unfortunately none; even though studies on East Indians in Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana were presented and could have been confronted. Most comparisons were being made on an impressionistic basis between Trinidad and Guyana, reaching the invariable conclusion that: the "situation is not the same" ...

5. It has been possible to obtain 3 papers, one of which, Ken Tracey’s paper, has been referred to. The other two are: C. Boxill’s: "From East-Indian to Indo Trinidadian" and J.M. Alleyne’s: "The creolization of Africans and Indians". Both papers are interesting on at least two grounds. In the first place, because they stressed that the dominant culture of Trinidad & Tobago is a creole culture. In the second place, because they did so, on a logical basis. A society cannot operate if its members do not share a common set of norms and values. Since there is some cohesion in this country, therefore Indo- and Afro-Trinidadians must share a common culture. It is suspected that both scholars are Afro-Trinidadians. As has been noticed earlier, Afro-Trinidian scholars refer to Indo-Trinidadians, through logical deductions, in most cases, and not through evidence or reliable information. C. Boxill’s paper contains more empirical data, but he is making generalization from samples of urban people.

It seems relevant to me, that no question can be raised about the existence of a Creole "culture" and a creole society, formed by members of both ethnic groups. Nonetheless, evidences of a strive for ethnic identification cannot be brushed aside with sentences like "most of the manifestations of 'Indianness' can only be considered as tools or weapons to be used in the quest for political and economic dominance" (J.M. Alleyne). (No doubt that the author would say the same about the "negritude" strive). To be operational and
to have a response from followers, the search for ethnic identity must be rooted on some "objective" facts. Researchers should ask themselves about who respond to those doctrines and why they do so. Some nuances must be introduced between urban and rural Indo-Trinidadians, beside the consideration of class (read strata) variables. Furthermore even though a Creole culture articulates social (read inter-personal) relations, is it necessary that the creole culture be or continue to be Afro-biased? Therefore some questions related to the status of Indo-Trinidadian "culture" must be answered. Is it a culture, or just bits, survivals of a culture? Is it Indian or flatly Trinidadian? Is it mainly a rural or an urban phenomenon? Is it relegated because it is rooted among Indo-Trinidadians, or because it is rooted among rural dwellers, who happen to be Indo-Trinidadians? etc. In a word, those papers on "creolization" still have to account for "pluralism". It is necessary to build up a theory where both "creolization" and "pluralism" are explained and pondered in their implication for social and political practices.

**Pamphlets distributed**

6. During the symposium, as usual, some pamphlets were distributed by activists. Two reached me. One called "Guyana - Rhodesia in reverse", presented by the Guyana Council of Indian Organizations (GCIO), denounces facts that are believed discriminatory to Indo-Guyanese. It is an interesting document, but what is stressed in it can be better dealt with through the second pamphlet "Indians and Black Power" (Indian Newsletter, Trinidad & Tobago, June 1975). This second document analyzes the strivings of Black Power Groups to rally Indo-Trinidadian support. If the racist tone of the document is put aside, some relevant facts are pointed out, and they seem to be of importance.

   a) Indians "out in the country" never lost their culture. Indians in general wish to maintain their differences vis-a-vis
the Blacks (i.e. Afro-Trinidadians). Their culture is being wiped out and blackness is being forced upon them. They have been exploited and discriminated against as a people and not as a class.

b) Indians (not Indo-Trinidadians, or some words of the sort) do not share anti-white orientation. Black Power is a U.S. import, which strives towards Pan-Africanism and "Negritude". Black Power people are paternalistic in relation to Indians.

c) Civil Service, Police Forces, Army, Fire Services, Coast Guard are black dominated. Agriculture and fishing are being strangled because they are Indian controlled.

d) Fellow Indians collaborating with "Black Power structure" are traitors. They are to be found among businessmen, professionals, and intellectuals.

Final comments

7. This limited experience, attending the Symposium, seems to point out some preliminary considerations on the issue:

a) Scholars are working on what Edward Brathwaite called the "inner plantation"; these studies are incipient, it seems, but the symposium showed the large acceptance of this search for a Caribbean self, and the still cordial atmosphere in which the search is taking place.
b) Political problems are so vivid, that scholars are tempted to give up their position and to enter in the arena. Since reflections are embryonic on the "inner plantation" and conflicts latent, it is to be feared that political slogans replaced modest hypothesis and lead to opportunism.

c) The distance between the academy and the large public seems huge. Nonetheless, it must be asked who is "ahead" of whom. Impression was given that many scholars, in their political strive, showed more racism than the audience, even though their racism was cleverly camouflaged.

d) It has been proposed by a scholar, backed by some member of the public, that the few things that are known on race relations should be taught at primary and secondary schools level. This seems urgent. Nonetheless, before reaching this point, it would be highly desirable that more symposia of the like with much less participants should be held. Limitations of the subject matters may help.

e) It seems that the core of Indian "culture" or of "Indianness" is located among peasants. Search for ethnic identification, as among champions of Black Power or Negritude, is an urban problem or better still a problem of some occidentalized Indo-Trinidadian strata. For rural and poor people, this is a matter of course:
They perceive themselves and are perceived by others, like "Indian". They are never simply peasants, workers or even men; but always Indian peasants, Indian workers, or Indian persons. Is "Indian culture" a sub-culture in a larger Creole framework, or a complete ideological system distinct of and oppressed by a dominant creole culture?

f) It seems that the resurgence of "Indianness" is linked to "urbanization and marginalism", i.e. to the existence of larger and larger number of urban dwellers, coming from the countryside, lacking of an opportunity to be fully socialised in the urban creole Afro-biased way of life and to share its rewards. Is there a relation between unemployment and resurgence of racial discrimination? If there is shortage of jobs, would urbanites be favoured against new-comers into the city?

g) It seems that the imbalances between economic sector (primary -vs- secondary and tertiary) being doubled by ethnic distribution of the labour force, provoke a switch in the perception of labour conflicts. "Internal colonialism", unequal development or cleavages between "workers' aristocracy" and unskilled labourers seem to be perceived as a racial conflict. Is it possible to bend the tendency of primary sector towards deterioration of its participation in the GNP? Is it possible to modify the income distribution pattern? Would a modification through welfare services satisfy dispossessed groups?
h) It seems that in the general frame of reference of a creole society, search for an ethnic identity is coming under attack from two angles. Official institutions (mainly educational systems and mass media) that cannot cope with such demands on the one hand, and on the other, different ethnic groups that are suspicious of their respective intentions. It seems that "creole" culture has more resources to integrate "blackness", insofar as this ideological trend is also rooted in the metropolitan countries, than resources to integrate "Indianness" which is based mainly on a "peasant" outlook. Can a given political structure cope with these demands and solve racial conflicts without a strive against cultural dependency? Is "blackness" or "Indianness" a consumption good for the tourist industries? If these doctrines wish, as it seems, to be more than folkloric revivals, if their partisans can avoid being manipulated by tourist industries, and can create social forces capable of modifying private as well as public lives of their supporters, will it be possible to avoid a voluntary and hopefully temporary isolation from the international setting? In other words, is it possible to tackle, in the educational system, cultural dependency or mental colonialism, without affecting time dedicated to the teaching of science and technology?
i) Inversely, is it possible to have "development" without solving the latent race conflict; to overlook internal inequalities and expect spontaneous solutions to a potentially violent struggle? Does the absorption of labour force in the secondary and mainly in the tertiary sector, offer a trend which will take West Indian societies away from racial conflicts? From what type of research, will come out strategies to correct any deviation towards racial violence?