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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA

Office for the Caribbean

COMMENTS

on
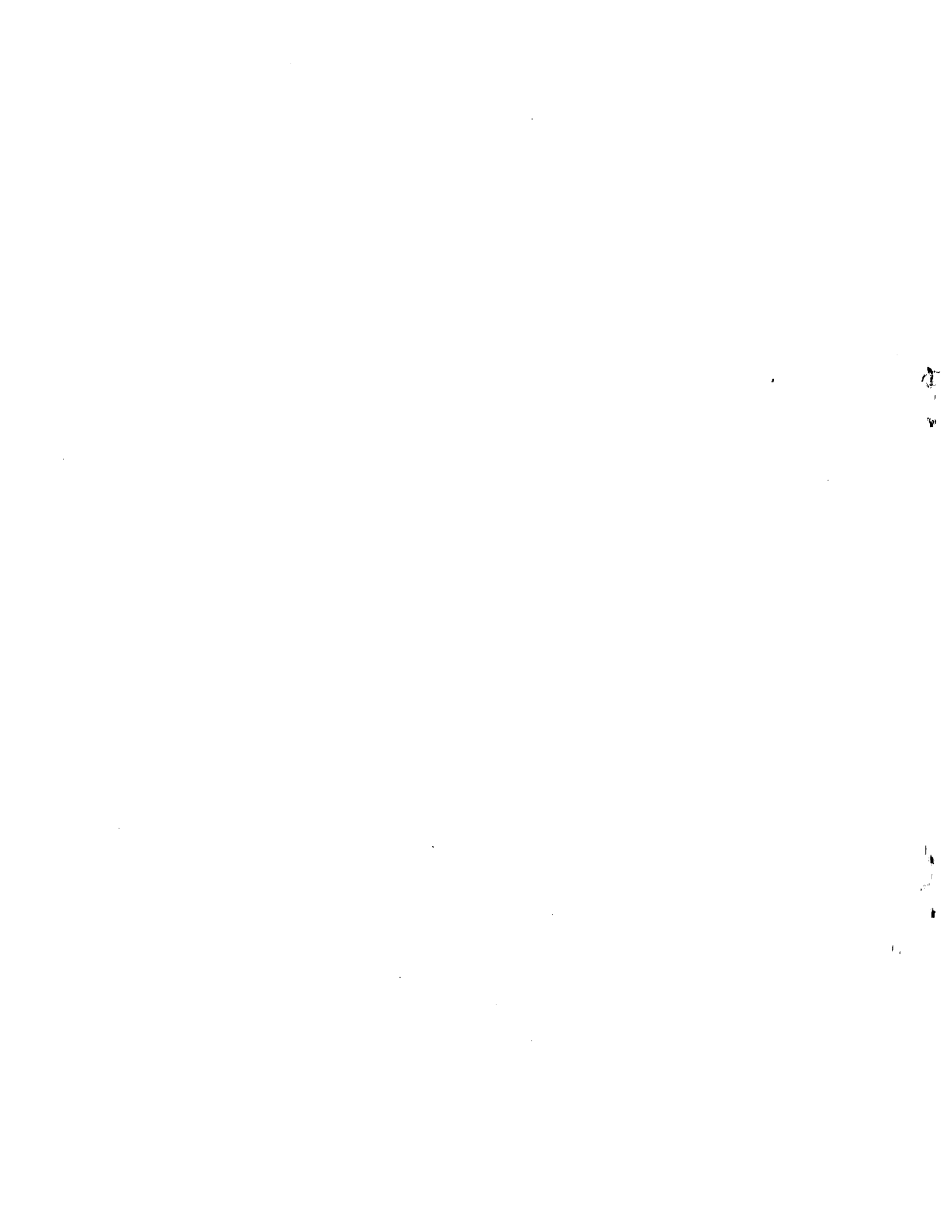
"EAST INDIANS in the CARIBBEAN –

A Symposium on Contemporary Economic and

Political Issues"

(Trinidad – 25 to 28 June 1975)

Prepared

by

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Comments

on

"EAST INDIANS in the CARIBBEAN

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 dia-
logues 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 presenta-
tions - always schematrical - 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 mis-
      interpretation. He chose not to be under-
      stood; 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

4.   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 res-
pect, 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 re-
markable 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 act-
ivists 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 behavourist 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 domi-
nant 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-Trinidadian scholars refer to Indo-Trinidadians, through logical
deductions, in most cases, and not through evidence or reliable in-
formation. 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 econ-
omic 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 necess-
ary 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 <u>as a people</u> 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.

<u>Final comments</u>

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 ia 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 un-
employment and resurgence of racial discrim-
ination? 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 per-
ception of labour conflicts. "Internal
colonialism", unequal development or cleav-
ages between "workers' aristocracy" and un-
skilled 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 in-
stitutions (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", inso-
far 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 depend-
ency? Is "blackness" or "Indianness" a
consumption good for the tourist indus-
tries? If these doctrines wish, as it
seems, to be more than folkloric revivals,
if their partisans can avoid being mani-
pulated by tourist industries, and can
create social forces capable of modify-
ing 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 de-
pendency 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?