

OUTSIDER-INSIDER: VIEWS OF INDO GUYANESE CULTURE FROM A CLOSE COLONIAL DISTANCE

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Growing up on a Guyanese sugar estate was an eye-opener in terms of Indian Diasporic culture. Most of the workers were Indo-Guyanese and one absorbed that culture by osmosis. As a white boy, the son of an overseer/manager, one 'naturally' had house servants. They were racially mixed but more often the house boy was Indian and filled our young minds with tales of Mother India and Daughter Guyana. One, 'Barlo', was with us for many years and we are still in touch - he lives in Canada. Through him we got a prism on the Indian culture on the estate and wider afield. We would frequently visit his house and family, be invited to religious ceremonies in the temple and mosque, to riverside (in reality trench side) pre-marriage rituals and to weddings themselves. This short paper will look at the history and sociology of the period, examine the fine racial graduations and social strata of a colonial society in miniature see how they worked in reality and ask what the Indo-Guyanese taught the Colonial whites in British Guiana

I am a Colonial boy but an insider-outsider; the product of an Anglo-Scottish father settler and a mother of long - and sometimes distinguished - British Guianese extraction, going back two centuries. I was the fourth and last child and the only boy. I grew up for all of the 1950s on two Sandbach Parker sugar plantations - Providence and Peter's Hall - on the East Bank of the Demerara River.

It provided a unique vantage point to experience white (or near white) colonial estate culture - its social mores and to be frank, the sheer claustrophobia of it - and through osmosis and at one remove, Indo-Guyanese culture which in many senses was much richer and more rooted than the overseer culture. It was the racial culture to which we were closest through everyday employment and familiarity and also because the African Guyanese had removed themselves from the country and mainly migrated to the town of Georgetown. There was a free black village called Mocha near Providence. That never entered my boyhood consciousness.

That osmosis took place in a wide range of spheres - from the personal to the political. Most of the experiences were very, very positive. Directly in our home my parents employed/were given servants by the plantation company. My main memory is of 'Barlo' the yard boy who was with us for many years. I was close to him as we were often the only males at home during the day in a female dominated household. He minded me. He was my main prism to this other world. Through him and his stories I learned about Mother India and her daughter Guiana. He

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would tell stories of his families' visits to India, bring in artefacts they had brought back as gifts and invite us to his home in Herstelling, the workers settlement across and up the main road. 'Barlo' was with my family for as long as I remember. He was a surrogate member. Less memorable to me were the other domestic staff like the cooks who daily dished up delicacies – one plate of English food always for my father one local dish for the rest of us (a lifetime curry addiction is a result) and the 'grannies' who weeded our and other estate gardens. As a child that garden seemed huge to me. When in Guyana last week I revisited. It is a cottage garden.

Nearer to home were others who entered our space. One of my sisters, Lisl Ann, reminded me of the rat catchers who would bring their quarry to our house at night for my father to count them for their payment to be sanctioned. Once done, the rats would be fed to the dogs. Yesu Persaud who has very generously endowed the Yesu Persaud Centre at Warwick University of which I am a fellow, comes from rat-catcher stock. His father did the job on Diamond Estate up the road from Providence. The major social focus of the estate - the Club - was invariably run by Indo-Guyanese stewards and barmen who became our 'friends', especially if we wanted a cool drink.

Across the tracks in the logie of Herstelling, I would, unusually for a white boy, be found visiting, being nosey, crabbing etc. My father designed that settlement; though another of my sisters, Sarah, tells me he resisted a maternal call to name a road 'Mair road' as being too vainglorious. It had a sports ground and I recall going with my parents to open the Sports Day. I would attend Indian weddings in Herstelling - that curry habit again - sometimes through invite, others through the simple device of attaching myself to the wedding procession or simply gate-crashing the wedding house. The Guyanese call it 'popping'. That too has become a lifetime habit. My abiding memory is of much loud music, much gold flashing, much alcohol being consumed - and seven curries. That curry connection again. I still also clearly recall looking out from my house at the nighttimes, pre-wedding Hindu ceremonies of blessing involving 'duttie' beside the river - in reality the punt trenches around the cane fields were used instead.

My father, the English overseer, was the primary Indo-facer of our family. His encounters were everyday through his mule boy who was supposed to look after his (and his steers) every whim in the backdam. In reality they were a historic relic and used for other tasks by the overseers. John Mair also daily interfaced and managed the cane cutters, fertilisers and weeders who looked after the crops and the Estate office staff whom we colonialists developed into a caste of paper pushers and pedants in Guyana and throughout the British Empire.

Off the estate, weekly Saturday visits - free because we were privileged whites - to the Indramahal cinema in Peter's Hall showed Indo-Guyanese estate culture in the raw. Getting past the rum shop - the Cellar bar - next door was no mean achievement. My stomach full of the excellent channa, polhouris, roti and metai

on sale outside. Inside was a little India with early Bollywood movies blaring to the delights of the pit at the front containing the lowest of the low, the drunkest of the drunk and the most pugilistic. Indo- Guyanese women and children were more refined and sat in the House further back. Us posh (usually white) folk sat in the balcony up by the projectionists - out of firing range. The “Indramahal” was Indian-owned and Indian-run with a largely Indian audience attracted by loudspeaker vans up and down ‘the Bank.’ My lasting memories are of films of Indian love stories, plenty music, much audience noise (interactive media before the computer) and an everpresent smell of urine!

Happy Saturdays

Off the estate daily we were taken by estate bus to our schools in Georgetown. Mine was the Sacred Heart RC Primary in Main Street Georgetown. It was multi racial and multi-cultural, I sat next to a young East Indian boy in my first or second year-the school called it Little and Big ABC. Together we went through the school skipping years and arriving at the top sixth standard early. There we had an excellent Indo-Guyanese teacher Mr Arokium, he stimulated and beat us if we did not perform. I won many of Bonnie Ramson and my academic competitions right down to the best scholarship in ‘the Colony’ at the end of Primary. A quarter of century later I caught up with that East Indian boy in the Everest Cricket Club - another vital fulcrum of Indo-culture in Guiana and Guyana. He is Charles Ramson and now he is Attorney General of Guyana. We are firm friends (and competitors) to this day, in and out of the Everest.

Finally over all of this childhood Nirvana hung the spectre of Independence, East Indian political power, Cheddi Jagan and the PPP. In the micro-bigoted and ill-informed world that was a 1950’s sugar estate, Jagan was a devil, Janet Jagan a she-devil, especially as she was ‘one of us’ - white. Jagan incited the sugar workers to strike and resist and get rid of colonialism with some success though the result was not achieved until 1966. Jagan truly was their hero and I can remember no other politics than the PPP among those estate workers at that time. The whites look to Peter D’Agiuar and his United Force as their life raft against the tide of anti-colonialist history. That was swept away.

So, there we have it – the outsider/insider, one pair of white eyes at one time in the history of British Guiana; the fin de siècle of two hundred years of colonial settlement and a century and more since the first indentured labourers arrived from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in their ships to settle in these new found lands of ours. They replaced the freed slaves. Now they have replaced us white masters. This is but one little boy’s take on this great civilisation transplanted to the hot Caribbean sun. Indo-Guyanese have left lasting memories, scarred on my psyche and, yes, I still love curry and roti - especially if cooked the Guyanese way.

References

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