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University of Kwa-Zulu Natal,
CCS and Harold Wolpe
Dialogue

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Durban

Topic:

INDIANS IN SOUTH
AFRICA:
150 YEARS

Speakers:

Prof. Dilip Menon: The world left behind?

The histories of migration in the age of indentured labor.

Ms. Ela Gandhi: The relevance of the 150 year commemoration
of the indenture workers for today's generation.

The aim of these dialogues is to create a space for open and informed dialogue and debate around key local and global political, social and economic issues facing South Africa.

The relevance of the 150 year commemoration of the coming of the indentured workers for today's generation- speech at UKZN Wolpe lecture series

In the last few months we have been exposed to a number of speeches articles and even books focusing on the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the indentured workers to South Africa. Issues discussed have ranged from the influence of the Indian community on education, sports, culture, religion, politics and economics in our country. The highlight being the legacy of Satyagraha or the nonviolent movement started by Mahatma Gandhi and the subsequent defiance campaigns and nonviolent struggle waged by the masses of our people. Indeed our combined history has many highlights too many to dwell on right now. Suffice to say that none of us are an island and we all do influence and are influenced by our interactions with each other.

What however has affected this natural process in South Africa has been three hundred years of enforced separation into racial and ethnic groups. In addition we have all been subjected to propagandist education which emphasised the differences rather than the similarities, and interpreted history in terms of the perspective of the religiously ordained superior entitlement of the white race. I remember for instance learning about the “Indian problem”, “the native incursions” reflecting the subordinate position of the other race groups in the country.

The differential treatment meted out by the government and the abject deprivation resulted in one, a vertical stratification of South African community in terms of class, and two, a systematic break up of family life experienced, as the devastating effects of poverty began to emerge. This is our common heritage against which we all resisted. That resistance is also our common heritage, which unfortunately has largely been left undocumented or documented with distorted versions. For us the slogan “apartheid divides UDF unites”, coined in the turbulent 80’s is the key to our unity and nation building processes.

What then is the importance of the 150th anniversary? For me there are two very significant features which are crucial for our community today and for the 21st century in particular..

The first significant factor is the indenture system, which brought the Indian workers to the shores of South Africa. Historically the white settlers who annexed huge tracts of land would not have been able to run their huge farms without slave labour. Historians record that there was a feeling that white people should not demean themselves by working as labourers. (Frank Welsh) There was therefore a constant struggle for land and for cheap labour. In the Cape a law was passed declaring it compulsory for black people to provide labour.

According to historians the early White settlers saw a 7 thousand acre farm as a birthright. Many farms were much larger.(Welsh) Labour was essential to till such large farms. As a result when slavery was abolished they had to find other means of obtaining cheap labour. So indentured labour was an attractive option.

These indentured workers were people brought from the rural areas of India. Persuaded to sell all their belongings and come to a new country where they were, made to believe, that they could build a better life for themselves and their families. In some cases only the men came, in others families came. Back then wives and daughters did not seek employment. Yet arriving in South Africa they were rudely shocked to find that they were all treated as commodities, scrutinized by the buyers and paid for and bought to work on a 5 year contract.

With the exception of some employers, the wives and children were forced to work. This was the beginning of a hard journey for many of the workers, men and women. There was no limit on the working hours, there were no days off, pregnant women had to work to the very last day and even nursing mothers had to leave their babies often unattended, so that they can attend to the needs of their employers, these needs sometimes included sexual favours. It is recorded that some of these workers committed suicide out of frustration and exhaustion, some tried to flee but were pursued and brought back and sometimes killed. Such was the wicked system of exploitation of one set of people by another. It had to come to an end as did slavery.

But there were other systems. Imposition of tax on rural independent African communities who did not trade in money. This was used to force African men and women to seek work. Paying of tax meant that they had to earn the money they needed to pay tax. To earn the money they had to offer their labour. Because they were desperate for work they would work for low wages and face difficult conditions of work. It was this law that Chief Bambatha rebelled against.

Later pass laws were imposed and this time they found an innovative system which enabled the police to arrest African people on a charge of not having a pass on their person. These arrested and sometimes charged people were then sent to the farms as prison labourers. This system was exposed by Ruth First in her investigation of the Bethal farms in the late 40's and early 50's leading to the potato boycott.

Today we have sweat shops The common thread through all these different strategies is exploitation of one human being by another. What we see over the ages is that humanity finds justification for such exploitation in racism, in religious beliefs, in cultural elitism and so on.

So for me the relevance of the 150th anniversary is to once again be horrified by the atrocities of the indenture system and pledge to work to ensure that nothing, even remotely akin to it, is allowed to exist in the world again. If we can work towards that goal we would have achieved the dreams and aspirations of our leaders.

Observing the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the indentured workers should be a call to all of us that while we recall and condemn indenture as that inhumane system of exploitation, we also take steps to block other ways of exploitation in the future. We need to impact on the minds of people to develop a conscience which will not tolerate

the exploitation of one human being by another be it on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, religion, or gender.

The second point, I realised when I was thinking about this anniversary, and was reminded of the period in 1972/73 when the move was made to revive the Natal Indian Congress. There were some very intense debates on the efficacy of this move, culminating in a poster demonstration at the inaugural meeting which was held to seek a mandate from the public for the revival. The posters clearly stated THINK BLACK NOT INDIAN. This message was loud and clear and remained to guide the work of the NIC through out the following decades of its existence. Yet this was not an uncontroversial message as some were genuinely referring to the “Think Black” while others wanted the organisation to be black. Some who felt that organising the Indian community was practical and would help to mobilise the community at grassroots level. They felt that they will be able to steer the people towards building a non-racial unity; others felt that we should be looking at Indian needs only. There was a group that felt that non-racial unity can only be achieved if the organisation itself was black.

Notwithstanding these differences of opinion, the NIC was revived as a predominantly Indian political organisation, working for a united liberated South Africa. The debate about its composition remained one that occupied many generations of black politicians and the debate still continues. While I know that there are many views on this subject, my personal view is based on one example. That is the one set by the trade union movement. We see that their strength lies in mobilising in terms of sectors and then uniting them into a general trade union. Those who try to mobilise the workers on a general basis remain small and ineffective. Sectors are organised more effectively because of three factors, they have common constraints and issues around which they readily come together; they have common employer base; and they have common wage and conditions of work constraints. These common factors makes it easier to mobilise them.

Similarly when people live in the same neighbourhood, experience the same problems and are interacting with each other there is a greater possibility of them coming together in a strong organisation.

The reality in South Africa was that the different race groups were and to a large extent are living in separate areas. They each have distinct experiences and issues in their residential areas. But when there are common problems then the communities readily come together.

Leaders such as Monty Naicker, Yusuf Dadoo, Billy Nair, Moses Mabida, A.B. Xuma, Duma Nokwe and others while struggling for liberation also ensured that they built unity among the different race groups. .

Today when commemorating the 150 years, we need to remember that heritage of unity and solidarity that was built in the struggle. This is what our forefathers would want to see and this is what our leaders dreamt about –a united democratic South Africa.

Dr Monty Naicker whose 100th birth anniversary we celebrate this year, is remembered by many to be a medical practitioner who attended to the poorest of the poor ailing patients and he gave immediate treatment before checking whether the patient had money to pay the fees. One person actually related a story that Dr Naicker did not only waive the fee because the person did not have any money but after treating him gave him money to get a bus back home, and buy some bread. Can we bring back this kind of caring and spirit of giving?

I believe that this spirit is of extreme importance as we move into the 21st century, a time when we are facing major issues of environmental degradation, climate change and other problems of disasters which makes our planet fragile. We also see in the midst of these looming problems, that millions of people have no access to safe drinking water, shelter, education and health care. We are facing the huge divide between the few billionaires of our times and the millions of poverty stricken people. How does one deal with this situation?

The United Nations has set the millennium development goals. Governments are entrusted with meeting these. Reports indicate that we are not getting anywhere near meeting these goals. Fingers are pointed at governments and perhaps the governments are to a large extent responsible.

But I believe that the governments are a reflection of society, they do not exist in isolation. When our government goes astray we are all tainted. I say this because it is in my understanding important for us as civil society to begin to change our society before we can change our government. We have to change our thinking from highly individualistic attitudes to communal selfless attitudes, from a highly consumerist society to a conservationist society. Such a society will not lend itself to corruption or to amassing of wealth. This is the legacy left to us by our leaders who struggled against tremendous odds but stood tall through it all.

A people who will wait for miracles to happen will continue to wait. We can build an egalitarian society ourselves through changing our own attitudes. The capitalists will be forced to stop producing in excess when we stop buying excessively.

For me then the relevance of the 150th anniversary lies in these two points, viz. stop exploitation and change our attitudes. I think that we can each help to lay the blocks for a new world as our forefathers did when they fought against exploitation and oppression. All through our struggle we spoke about the triple oppression. Oppression because we are black, oppression because we are poor and oppression on the basis of gender. Some young people told me we had a cause to fight for back in those days. I say that we still have a cause to fight for today. Poverty and gender issues continue to remain a cause and we can commit ourselves to this cause. But now that we have a democratic government we need to find other strategies of struggle. We have to work within the community. Awaken the souls of our people so that generations to come will celebrate our contribution.