

AFRICAN AND INDIAN IN DURBAN

FATIMA MEER

The following article was written just before the Emergency, having been commissioned by the Editor to commemorate one hundred years of Indian settlement in South Africa. The large number of Indians detained under the Emergency underlines many of the main conclusions in the study, reflecting the growth in joint Afro-Indian resistance to the doctrine and practice of white supremacy. Mrs. Meer is a sociologist attached to the University of Natal. Her husband, a prominent Indian lawyer and Congress official, is at present in indeterminate detention under the Emergency Regulations.

DURBAN stands in a singular position of fascination for all those interested in the reactions of a multi-racial society. It is the only important city in South Africa which has offered two dominated groups of people—numerically alike, ethnically different, but sharing a generally common political, social and economic status—the experience and experiment of working out the problems of racial interaction. How have Indians and Africans responded to this test? Since the unfortunate riots of 1949, when Africans in Durban gave vent to an entire history of social frustration by a violent attack on Indians, the question of Indo-African relations has kindled a new emphasis on race relations in the Union. Eleven years after the incident, its impact still lurks grimly in corners of the mind, and the tendency prevails even in areas of progressive and enlightened thought to approach the matter with some trepidation.

Despite their tragic results, the riots left the Indian community with little rancour against the Africans. There was doubt of African dependability in the face of press and governmental provocation; but direct blame was apportioned to the Government, the white public, and the local authority in Durban, which had for years waged a vendetta of unrestrained malignancy against the Indian people. The joint patrolling of the riot-affected areas by the leaders of the Indian and African Congresses, which since 1946 had been moving closer together, and the issuing of a joint statement by the two bodies, bearing such names as Doctors Naicker, Dadoo and Xuma, Messrs. A. W. Champion, Msimang, Oliver Tambo and Moses Kotane, in which they pledged active support for Indo-African unity and initiated a joint council of the two Congresses, strengthened this attitude. The results of interviews with seventy Indians, chosen at random and representing a reasonably fair cross-section of the community,

substantiated this observation when they gave white instigation as the most common single cause of the riots.¹

Durban of this period was plagued by hysterical anti-Indianism, brought to a head probably by the 1946 Indian Passive Resistance Campaign and the successful presentation of the South African Indian question before the United Nations in a manner which drew world attention to the more general problem of racial discrimination in the Union. Anti-Indianism kept Members of Parliament in their seats, newspapers on the streets and provided the most popular vote-catching bait in the 1948 elections.

A local United Party pamphlet described the Indians as "unassimilable and distasteful to all races in South Africa." Political speeches at all levels tended to violate the provisions of the Riotous Assemblies Act, and among those who indulged in such racialism were two future Governors-General, Dr. E. G. Jansen and Mr. C. R. Swart. The white press virulently supported this trend and took a leading part in creating and maintaining anti-Indian passions. They published high-pitched stories about Indian land-grabbing and the seduction of white girls in brothels run by Indians in white areas. Special scoops spread such headlines as: "HOW INDIANS ARE PENETRATING INTO WHITE AREAS"; "8 EUROPEANS RAID A DURBAN CLUB—MASKED MEN CAPTURE INDIAN WITH WHITE WOMAN—COUPLE GET ROUGH TREATMENT"; "EUROPEAN GIRLS—SENATE TO HEAR OF DURBAN'S LUXURIOUS INDIAN BROTHELS". These had the planned effect of raising a white public hue and cry, which significantly contributed to the promulgation of the Group Areas and Immorality Acts.

Neither the horror of the riots nor the destitute condition of the Indians, almost one-sixth of whom became temporary refugees, abated this anti-Indianism. Contrasting reports appeared in the press of the exemplary behaviour of Africans in refugee camps, who paid for all relief, and the dishonest, unco-operative attitude of the Indians, who, despite free rations, refused to assist officials and pilfered food when possible for

¹ 50% gave white instigation as cause of the riots.

15% gave Indian black market practices as the cause.

12½% gave African emotional weakness and jealousy of Indian success.

12% gave an Indian superiority complex.

6% gave African frustrations which used Indians as the scapegoat.

2½% gave racial hatred of Indians.

2% gave the initial skirmish between an Indian and an African.

13 of the Indians questioned were riot victims themselves, and all but one felt no rancour at all against the African people. They saw the causes of the riots in the following order—white instigation, poor social conditions, Indian black market practices, African ignorance. 10 reported loyal assistance from African friends and neighbours during the attacks.

illicit sales. Interviews were published in which anonymous Africans alleged seduction of African girls by Indians, Indian black market practices and rack renting. A feature article criticized Indians for lacking in civic sense², for failing to rise to the riot crisis and falling dependent on white welfare organizations. Another described them as "crafty fellows, innately dishonest in business and confirmed perjurers". Prominent white citizens tried to create the impression that stark discrepancies existed between the provision of Indian and African amenities, and made such poorly briefed statements as: Indians received free and compulsory education;³ the Municipality provided seventy-five per cent of Indian housing!⁴

A vicious press undercurrent tried to incite the African even further against the Indian. An unwarranted front page headline, the largest in the particular newspaper, carried a story of a police warning to Indian leaders to keep in check Indian instigation of reprisals against Africans. Local Members of Parliament requested legal assistance for Africans only before the Riot Commission Board, stating that Indians could afford their own defence.⁵ There was a general tendency among the whites to identify themselves with the rioters. Some observed them sympathetically and were caught by the camera on newsreels and stills, silently enjoying the spectacle. Some assisted in the actual rioting; while some, many of whom were officially placed, tried to use the situation for the instigation of an African boycott of Indian trade and transport. Alternate municipal transport services were immediately provided and sustained for an unduly long period over routes normally operated by Indian buses, and government food depôts were set up for Africans to relieve them of the obligation to deal with Indian shops. While no generalized tendency towards a boycott move existed among the Africans, such statements as "Africans will never buy from Indian shops again", "Africans will never travel on Indian buses again" were

² (a) The Indians were among the first to organize their own relief. Of the first £13,472 donated to the Riot Relief Fund, local Indians contributed £8,114, the Government of India £3,750.
 (b) Indians had built at the time one sixth of their own schools, and have an admirable record in the organization, building and supervision of their own social welfare institutions.

³ Only a year before, 800 Indians had marched through the streets of Durban carrying such placards as "30,000 Indian children without schools" "Seventy five per cent Indians illiterate."

⁴ Up to 1949, the Durban Municipality had built 662 houses for Indians and made available 90 building loans. Municipal estimates considered 3,210 houses necessary for the alleviation of Indian overcrowding in housing, and 1,380 for alleviation of African overcrowding — "Durban Housing Survey".

⁵ A survey by the Department of Economics, University of Natal, estimated in 1949 that more Indians in Durban than Africans lived under the poverty datum line. The Institute of Race Relations reported that 70.7% of Indians in Durban lived under the poverty datum line. There were 7,000 unemployed Indians at the time.

freely made in the press, some of them emanating from responsible officials.

The police, though warned well in advance by strongly circulating rumours of the outbreak of more violence, and kept continually informed by the Natal Indian Congress, were caught unawares and ill-equipped on the worst night of the riots. An African journalist observed how a European woman jumped out of a two-seater car and urged on the rioters, saying: "Fix up the bloody Coolies. The Government is with you." "Is that so, missus?" he asked. "Yes, of course; don't you see what the police are doing? They are not shooting you!"⁶

Very soon after the riots, the relationship between Indians and Africans in trade and transport resumed their normal place. The incident constituted an abnormal eruption symbolic of a frustrated and abnormal society. Group demonstrations, organized or spontaneous, against the various aspects of a highly repressive racial government, form part of the tradition of the non-white people in South Africa. The outburst against the Indians was a freak occurrence, a deviation from the common rule, which—due to some rare chance causes—lost its target and became confounded in a mood of violent human imbalance. It was not a symbol of African antagonism against Indians.

Last year saw a new wave of demonstrations in Durban. There was some bloodshed as a result of shooting by the police. Generally, the demonstrations were orderly and took on the pattern of attacks on authority. Municipal buses were boycotted, and Indians who tried to set up alternate emergency transport were charged. A story appeared in the *'Daily News'* that Indians were inciting Africans against the use of municipal buses. Secret reports flowed into the A.N.C. office that African municipal drivers were being instigated by white officials to promote a boycott of Indian buses by Africans. There was speculation. Would Indians be attacked? The annual Congress 'Freedom Day' meeting of June 26th saw 60,000 Indians and Africans gather together at an Indian sports ground and resound their hopes for freedom in a mood of manifest political unity.

A few months later, the public awoke to press reports of a new trend in the established pattern of demonstrations by African women throughout Natal. Africans had rushed out of a central beer-hall, reminiscently situated at the focal point where the 1949 riots had begun, dashed down the street, assaulted some Indian

⁶ *'Inkundla ya Bantu'*

peasant women squatting on the pavements hawking vegetables in their age-old tradition, and stoned Indian shop windows. An eye-witness reported later that police vans had stood by before the incident, but no action against the group of "rioters" had been taken until after damage had been done.

What was the meaning of this? Who were the assailants? They had been seen to enter the beer-hall just before this outburst. Had an attempt been made by some irresponsible section of authority deliberately to misdirect the course of the growing African demonstrations?

What is the state of Indo-African relationships today? A composite picture, perfectly objective, is a well-nigh impossible task in a problem of this magnitude. In any such relationship, the points of interaction are many and the actual relationship in operation can only be assessed in terms of a careful analysis of each of the significant points. Such a study of Indo-African relationship is not suggested here. The purpose of this article is to indicate the areas of Indo-African contact and evaluate the more general nature of the relationship operating in these.

General observations and discussions with people—seventy Indians and fifteen Africans were interviewed in a random selection reasonably representative of the community—prompt the belief that Indians and Africans have lived within reasonable bounds of amicability in Durban. Their relationship in the past has been no exception to the type of relationship which might be expected from two groups of people similarly placed, with cultural, linguistic and in some respects political and occupational differences. Their relationship today is better than could be hoped for from groups of people who have been used as pawns in the callous game of racial rivalries. This is a generalization that one deduces from their behaviour at public gatherings, their co-operation in sports and politics, and the close working together of the Indian and African Congresses.

Despite their differences, despite the small and significant areas of conflict which persist, there also exist strong emotional bonds between the two peoples—bonds forged in the shared misery of economic circumstances, joint experiences of malnourished babies, of living in overcrowded shacks, of sharing a communal tap, a communal privy. In a single yard there are many children, many frustrations. Among those who occupy it, there is much conflict; but, alongside the conflict, also a sympathy and an understanding.

Many Africans and some Indians tend to believe that the present state of general harmony obtaining between them has been forcibly brought about by the very dangers disclosed in the 1949 riots. Such a generalization, however, is superficial. Violence does not generally endear people to one another. The present relationship has emerged as the result of a voluntary movement from both sides towards each other. It is a result of a historical experience jointly tread. The early Indians stood aloof from the African as strangers do from each other. Indian leaders saw little logic in political identification with a group of people whose history in the country was so very different from their own. Theirs was a struggle against a British government for the redemption of broken promises, the reward of full citizenship rights offered them as a condition of their indenture to the colony of Natal. It was only after succeeding generations of Indians reorientated their relationship with government—saw it not as British or English, but white; saw themselves not as Indian, but black—that their political identification was born. It was not until Africans in skilled and semi-skilled trades set themselves up equally alongside the Indians, that the foundations of a labourer solidarity was laid. It was only when the urban Indian saw the African not purely as a migrant labourer, but as a member of a family unit, with personal ties as deep and manifest as his own, that the roots of primary social contact were sunk.

It is sociological belief that human integration is dependent on the proportion and variety of contact between people. Within the limits of a race restrictive society, Indians and Africans in Durban have experienced more contact in many more ways than any other two racial groups in the city, moving ever closer together in a community of interest.

While this growing together may be observed as the general process in the relationship between the two groups, stock must be taken of factors which impair the consummation of this trend. There are groups of people in both communities, small in number but intermittently vociferous, who—for reasons of personality, or traditions of a class, business or professional kind—remain aloof from each other. There are Indians, sometimes owners of cinemas and cafés, who enjoy the rewards of communal service on the boards of public institutions and who are reluctant to see any relaxation in communal consciousness. Invariably there are men of wealth who, due to their command over the material

benefits of an industrial society, draw large gaps between themselves and the Africans. Equally large gaps exist between them and other Indians. They stand aloof from the rest of the Indian people, but recognise that their roots are nowhere else. They stand aloof from the Africans and feel that there is an unbridgeable gulf between them. They appear either ignorant—or carefully avoid the knowledge—that the poorest of the Indians in Durban endure a form of material existence which in many respects may be described as more primitive than that of the African. Like whites they begin to believe that their good fortune has something to do with their inherent superiority as Indians, and so they encourage segregation between Indians and Africans in areas of contact over which they have control. It is in such situations, of course, that the seeds of bitter conflict between the two groups are scattered. And if the violence of the riots had an impact in changing Indian attitudes, then it was with reference to those of people falling into this group, a number of whom made new overtures to the African people and included them in their charities.

Generally Indians are not desirous of drawing social barriers between themselves and Africans. Seventy per cent of the Indians interviewed substantiated this observation. Indians and Africans have shared public amenities in common—in transport and educational institutions. They have lain together in adjoining hospital beds with no marked adverse reactions to each other. Only five per cent of the seventy Indians interviewed, on such points of contact as eating in common cafés, sharing common schools and transport services, and sitting alongside each other in cinemas, favoured a state of complete separation. While sixty-five per cent accepted unconditional integration, thirty per cent showed hesitation on some points of contact.⁷ Rarely, however, was race superiority given as a reason for the reservations held. On the contrary, the recent trend has been for Indian opinion to express unequivocal condemnation of the segregatory practices obtaining in some Indian-owned cafés and cinemas; and youth, student, women and Congress organizations have been briefed to take active steps against them.

The fact that very little primary informal contact exists between Indians and Africans has often been misused to indicate

⁷ Seven preferred segregated seating at cinemas.

Four objected to sharing common schools (Three out of fifteen Africans interviewed did likewise.)

Five objected to eating in same cafés.

Five objected to sharing same common transport.

a state of antagonism and racial prejudice between the two peoples. It is pointed out that Africans rarely appear at Indian social functions and that even at university level, where inter-communal contact between the two peoples is much increased, considerable strain exists. The Indians are often blamed for this, and it is alleged that any social distance flows from a general feeling of superiority they entertain over Africans. Indians themselves tend to agree with this accusation; and although sixty per cent of those interviewed believed in the inherent equality of the two peoples, the vast majority felt that other Indians did not do so. African opinion itself has shown painful awareness of what it has termed "Indian arrogance" and has drawn repeated attention to it.

It is not however racial arrogance which raises barriers to primary personal contact between Indians and Africans, but rather the limiting nature of the Indian social system. Outwardly homogeneous, South African Indians are a complex people broken up into smaller inter-related units in terms of their religious, language, and sensitively different ethnic practices, which confine and control all such contact as is implicit in the choice of friends, guests and marriage partners. The vast majority of them, the Hindus, have a heritage of the most rigid form of social division and stratification. Though generally emancipated from the impact of closed caste taboos, Indians still adhere strongly to the restrictive traditions of language and religion. Even the extension of some voluntary educational and social welfare facilities are limited by such barriers, and restrictions operate against their use by Indians of the "out group". The Indians thus erect barriers not only against Africans but equally against themselves, as they accumulate differences and consequently create associational units which are only outwardly integrated.

Indians *could* have maintained a state of isolation and perhaps enjoyed social conditions slightly better than those of the African people. There is no justification for believing that they are possessed of any greater concern for posterity, or have greater foresight than the average South African who lives in the present and ignores the future. The point requires some stressing that Indians have chosen to ally themselves politically with the African people, whatever social inhibitions persist.

The fact that the vast area of Indo-African relationship takes place on a parity level progresses this trend of co-operation and better understanding. Of the 85 Indians and Africans inter-

viewed, 77 indicated their knowledge of each other as neighbours, fellow workers and fellow students. Although primary contact is low, secondary contact between Indians and Africans on a more formal mass level is high, and every major move in the identification of non-white interest, in sports and politics, tends to flow from Durban and is often initiated by Indians. In keeping with the tone they have set for the observation of the Indian Centenary—'One hundred years in a multi-racial society. Forward to a non-racial democracy'—Durban Indians have recently created a £50,000 Trust Fund for the equal extension of Indian and African educational interests.

While non-white political aspirations are doomed for as long as power remains exclusively in white hands, non-white sport may attain international recognition within the present political framework to the exclusion of whites-only teams claiming to represent South Africa. The realization of this power and its effective demonstration in the international recognition accorded to the non-white sponsored, non-colour bar table tennis body, has combined with social and political pressures to rid non-white sport of any taint of racialism. Socially and politically, non-white leaders saw a real danger in the limiting of non-white relationships in sport to a contest between two racially opposed teams. In Durban the situation became periodically threatening when large soccer meetings, attracting upwards of 25,000 people and drawing equal Indian and African audiences, became roused to a display of opposed emotions, which soon enough became racially transcribed.

Significantly Durban made the first moves in organizing matches on an inter-race level, in instituting play between teams provincially rather than racially divided, and in opening the doors of local clubs to a mixed membership. Today federal bodies centralise non-white cricket, soccer and tennis, and constitutions are being changed to direct the selection of players along non-ethnic lines. It is an additional compliment to Durban that while in Natal non-white athletics, boxing and table tennis have never operated clubs on a sectional basis, in the Transvaal, due partly to the isolationist nature of the average Chamber of Mines employee, these tend to be organized on racial lines..

Political identification between Indians and Africans is periodically demonstrated in Durban on a mass level at rallies and meetings. While two distinct political organizations exist, the Indian and African public is developing a tendency to view them

indiscriminately. In the absence of banned Chief Luthuli, the custom today is for African enthusiasts to carry Dr. Naicker, President of the S.A. Indian Congress, shoulder-high to the dance and words of popular liberatory songs. Politically conscious Indians accept today, without any reservation, the A.N.C. salute, A.N.C. flag, A.N.C. slogans. All major meetings are held jointly, very often in traditionally Indian venues and addressed co-operatively by representatives of both groups. Appropriately, the African takes the lead, even in providing the major proportion of attendance at an Indian Congress Conference! Symbolic of this identification were the actions of African women, some in tribal dress, who during a closed session of the last Natal Indian Congress Conference walked sombrely up the aisle and placed their donations of sixpences and shillings on the Indian chairman's table. Today no major or important political decision is taken without the joint concurrence of the two bodies, apart from that of the other members of the Congress alliance; and except at conference level, machinery exists at all others for such deliberations to be continuously effected.

It is sometimes stated that Indo-African political unity exists only on a leadership level and that the poor attendances of Indians at meetings do not warrant the claim that politically the two peoples are equally identified. While overt Indian political expression tends to be comparatively subdued at the present moment, there is little doubt of where Indian political allegiance lies. Although only thirty-nine per cent of the Indians interviewed had attended either of the two very large political meetings held in the course of the year, seventy-two per cent had responded to the African National Congress call to boycott potatoes and only nine per cent had done so out of fear of African reprisals.

Despair of Indo-African solidarity caused by the fatal one-day political strike of 1950, when Africans in Durban did not come out equally with Indians and many Indians found themselves dismissed and replaced by African workers, no longer exists. Seventy-four per cent of the interviewed Indians stated their faith in African political support. A recent demonstration in a local factory, when Africans struck work in protest against the dismissal of thirteen Indian women fellow workers, tended to justify this faith. The two peoples today are learning to believe that the attainment of full democratic rights is a task which they jointly share in Durban. The sincerity with which Indian

speakers are applauded by Africans, the elation which characterizes the joint political participations of the two peoples, the transmission of emotional strength and security mutually absorbed by an Indo-African audience pledging common vows to symbols mutually recognized and revered—these are experiences which go deep and possess an impact only to be assessed when actually felt.

While the uneven growth of Indians and Africans as industrial workers and trade unionists has had a deterrent effect in the development of Indo-African labour solidarity, growing African realization of trade union benefits is clearing a hitherto difficult field of Indo-African co-operation. Until recently, the Indian worker faced with growing apprehension the prospect of un-registerable African labour which approached the common market on a lower wage notch and depleted his own trade union strength. Today, under Congress influence, Africans and Indians are organized in parallel unions and centralized in a committee which has an African chairman, an Indian secretary, and representative members from the two groups on the committee. In those industries where Indian labour is in the minority, Indians have been persuaded to join African unions and they have done so despite the disadvantages of non-registration.

From mass level secondary contact, opportunities flow for the forging of more meaningful primary relationships which knit a people into a single social unit. Informal socials, dances and receptions, emanating from sports and politics, continue throughout the year and create possibilities for drawing together Indians and Africans as friends. Moments of tension are also there: hot words exchanged between an Indian driver, an African passenger; an accident between an Indian motorist, an African pedestrian: but these are few and far between and become overshadowed by the repeated, routine incidences of cordiality which characterize the scene.

Although so different in the general presentation of their lives—the outward impressions so contrasting—there are many aspects of the two cultures which substantiate human belief in the innate universality of man. Indians and Africans share such social values as are inherent in their concept of the family, their attitudes to women and children, their customs in the choice of marriage partners, their extension of informal warm hospitality to unexpected visitors, their strong attachment to ritual ceremony and superstitious beliefs, their fervent regard for

educational attainment and joy in the aspirations of their youth. In both groups, intermarriage has rarely produced the problems of outcast persons, and women and children have become adjusted and absorbed into the patriarchal group.

In a hundred years, Indians and Africans have come a long way. One may seek, isolate, and abstract the differences which exist, and on generalizations thus drawn, condemn groups of people to a state of perpetual irreconcilability. On the other hand, one may emphasize the points of identification which persist between man and man and build a society on these. Conflict is an aspect of interaction. No relationship, no matter how close, is without its element of conflict. There is conflict between Indians and Africans, but it is the type of conflict which is commensurate with greater interaction, the movement towards greater identification. Indians and Africans have accepted the challenge of a multi-racial society, and are today, particularly in Durban, inspiring hope for a non-racial democracy.

THE TOKOLOSH by **Ronald Segal**

Illustrated by **David Marais**

6s. net

The author of this short novel underlines the absurdity and evil of racial conflict and intolerance. It is written in the context of the terrible political situation now obtaining in South Africa, and can be seen as a work of grim prophecy.

" . . . a grim fairy story in which he has envisaged some of the repulsive events of the last few weeks in South Africa with an almost ironical accuracy."

Guardian

" . . . a terrible indictment of the policy of apartheid."

Daily Herald

"The courageous editor of Africa South has written a fanciful little fairy-tale of the utmost topicality. . . . but its message could hardly be truer."

New Statesman

Obtainable from your bookseller, or in case of difficulty write to:

SHEED & WARD
33, Maiden Lane, London, W.C.2.