Cultural Entrepeneurship and the Culturalisation of Politics Among Indians in South Africa[1]

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Introduction

The miracle that took place in South Africa's transition from a repressive Apartheid state to a nascent democracy after the April 27 1994 general election, gave the world a pleasant surprise. As religious groups and ethnic minorities competed for attention among the voting masses, a national euphoria around the concept of a 'rainbow nation' acquired precedence over the smaller voices that tried to stake distinctive group-based claims in South Africa's hard won political emancipation. It was clear that the population at large opted at the election polls to place its trust in a new era of nation building within the context of a secular state—in which the concerns of ethnic and religious minorities are underpinned by a national consciousness that is free from ideologies advocating federalism or ethnic states. In apartheid South Africa, ethnicity served as one of its pillars. It kept linguistic and racially defined populations separate from one another. This policy still strongly resonates among certain groupings in the post-apartheid era. For instance, the call for a federal state by the Inkatha Freedom Party in Kwa-Zulu Natal is supported by Zulu nationalism; similarly, the call for a White Afrikaner 'homeland' by various Afrikaner-based political parties is still rooted in ethnically-based Calvinist thinking. In many ways, ethnicity is still being articulated in South Africa in forms of religious and/or racial ethnicity. In much the same way that ethnicity still plays a role in India (Mukherji 1994:23), it is still prevalent among both Zulu and Afrikaner nationalist orientations (see also Venogopaul 1993; Hobsbawn 1990). This may not be at odds with the fragmentation that so many nation-

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states are undergoing since the break-up of the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe, but it is at odds with the national consciouseness that is emerging in South Africa.

In recent years ethnicity and nationalism merged in distinctive ways in different parts of the world, countervailing the notion of nationalism as it emerged from the incipience of the nineteenth century industrial revolution (Cohen 1974; Gellner 1983; 1987; Griesman 1975). Noting that nationalism is a modern phenomenon aimed at standardising values, allegiances, symbols, beliefs and traditions, Gellner (1987) states that, in the process of nation building, people often forget and underplay the significance of each of these aspects. Seeing this as a form of 'internal amnesia', he reminds us that while the nation building process in Turkey, for instance, followed the trend of the standardisation of values, the Turk, Slav, Greek, Armenian, Arab, Syrian, and Kurd are as distinct today as they had been since the first day of conquest. Gellner (1987:6-10) ascribes this fact to the Ottoman empire's centrally regulated system which fostered a certain independence of national and religious communities. This prevented ethnic melting pot trends. Even more concerted efforts to unite disparate groups— e.g. in the attempted merging of Hispanic and Black societies in the U.S.A. of the 1960s— these efforts were hardly successful (Eriksen 1993:8). The existence of separate groupings in the U.S.A. remain as distinctive as the variations in Turkey or in any other multi-cultural society.

Recognising the force and universal reality of ethnicity, Howe (1993)—in an editorial for a collection of papers on ethnicity—views the issue of democracy and nation building in South Africa as a myth of the democratic panacea. He attacks the issues of non-racialism and democracy as being falsely enshrined in 'the magical cloak of common values, shared beliefs, and national symbols—thrown over our racially fragmented society' (Howe 1993:5). He rightly asserts that what South Africa needs instead, is to build

> a new civil society which reconciles interests and identities at the local and regional level with a new South Africanism at the national level (Howe 1993:5).

Intrinsic to this process of reconciling interests and identities are ethnicity and religious fundamentalism. These may function either productively or counter-productively in attempts to build a new national consciousness. 'Ethnicity' as used by Howe, is here more succinctly explained by Mukherji's (1994:22) threefold outline of the concept, viz. (1) common descent (real or supposed); (2) socially relevant cultural or psychological characteristics; and (3) attitudes and behaviours within a social category (Mukherji 1994:22). However, ethnicity as a political force is not always binding in a consistent manner. For instance, while Africans in South Africa see themselves, as opposed to Whites, as being of common descent, a large fraction in KwaZulu-

Natal wish to see themselves as distinct from other Africans. Many Afrikaners too see themselves as separate from others of European descent. Similarly, religious fundamentalism may manifest in contradictory ways. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East in the 1970s, of Hindu and Sikh fundamentalism in India in the 1980s, and the more recent forms of religious sectarianism in the Baltic and East European states is indicative of the challenges that countries face if they attempt to build national consciousness at the expense of group identities. In this context, the sensibility of Peter Vale's warning is apt: 'We ignore ethnicity at our peril—if our society fails to engage it, it may rise to engulf us' (Howe 1993:4).

The sparks of the flames that may rise to consume South Africans in anarchy and ethnic violence are already way past the horizon, with White and Black right-wing groups threatening to hold the country under siege if their demands are not met. For instance, Maré's (1992) account of Zulu nationalism is a reflection of how the militaristic past and numerical strength of an ethnic group is used in the politicisation of its culture to forcefully articulate their position.

But not always can ethnic formations engage in such a process of the politicisation of culture. In this paper I aim to develop three arguments. Firstly, I define the concept of the 'culturalisation of politics' and illustrate its usefulness as a tool of analysis in studies of ethnicity. Secondly, I attempt to show how a section of South Africa's population, viz. those of Indian origin, are asserting their position as a 'minority group' through the culturalisation of their politics. Made-up of multi-linguistic, multi-religious, and multi-regional groups, Indian South Africans have by and large chosen the path of 'internal amnesia' to assert their exclusivity and minority status. And thirdly, I illustrate how, in several ways, their low-key struggle is cogently captured by a self-styled politician whose unique approach to the representation of Indian interests is characterised by the ways and means of a 'cultural entrepreneur'. I argue here that the representations of symbolic forms by a cultural entrepreneur must be located within the political context in which it occurs. What follows below will demonstrate that the cultural entrepreneur in the context of this paper, is not to be seen to stand outside the South African political process. Rather, he or she must be viewed as inseparably linked to it. This said, however, requires closer specification.

There is a fundamental difference between the culturalisation of politics and the politicisation of culture within the South African Indian context. The former, as it pertains to South Africa, is a political option that embraces methods of non-violence but simultaneously highlights present discriminatory practices and cultural alienation from the past (for the people of Indian origin). The purpose of this approach is to gain recognition for what was previously not recognised and to effect social and political change without compromising the identity that Indians have acquired for themselves in the South African scenario. Conversely, the politicisation of culture is an act, often

by violent means, of creating the basis for a distinctive group identity that is intended to develop a political consciousness that will steer its members towards a path of separate existence and political autonomy. Such an approach is articulated by members of the Afrikaner Weerstands Beweging and Conservative Party among white Afrikaners, and the Inkatha Freedom Party among Zulus.

Contextualising the 'Culturalisation' Process

The issue of ethnicity becomes ever more relevant to the political challenges facing South Africa today on especially two levels. The first is the global dimension that the reassertion of ethnicity has taken, especially in redrawing geographical boundaries and redefining rights and interests; the second is the dynamics that ethnicity has unleashed within the boundaries of South Africa. Within the contexts of frameworks for analyses, theoretical paradigms and empirical realities, ethnicity as a tool of social analysis has engendered an ambiguity that either helps to understand and compare the phenomenon externally and internally, or presents scenarios that are unhelpful to the constraints faced by South African policy makers and academics. Intrinsic to both these factors are the broad generalities that dominate the literature, compounded by the glaring absence of greater detail on how ethnicity unfolds to confront the political, economic, social, religious and related dynamics of everyday life.

Literature on the *global dimensions of ethnicity* has covered three broad issues: attempts to (1) trace the history of the concept and link its current usage to contemporary problems; (2) illustrate how cultural and political processes converge and diverge on significant questions of colonialism and nationalism respectively; and (3) how, nationalist ethnic consciousnesses challenge secular ideologies rooted in nineteenth century rationalism and either call for its radical revision or its total refutation.

Maré (1992:3) traces back the use of the word 'ethnicity' to 1941 whereas Eriksen (1993:3) claims that its first usage is attributed to the American sociologist David Riesman in 1953. Both agree, however, that the word is derived from a much more ancient source, viz. the Greek word 'ethnos' which meant pagan or heathen.

Eriksen (1993:4) informs us that since the 1960s the word 'ethnic group' and 'ethnicity' was widely used in Anglophone Social Anthropology. Politically, it was first used by the British where they were dominant, especially against Jews, Irish, Italians and other victims of subordination. However, the discrimination against such groups did not lead to a denial of either their origins or their social and cultural characteristics. If anything, it helped to entrench the notion of ethnic exclusivity, despite the impositions of a hegemonic force that aimed to standardise so many features in modern day living. Eriksen (1993:9) is correct in arguing that ethnicity is frequently a reaction to processes of modernisation, although they may not necessarily constitute

an aversion for them. Referring to Jonathan Friedman, he emphasises that ethnic and cultural fragmentation and modernist homogenisation are not two arguments or two opposing views of what is happening in the world today, but two constitutive trends of global reality. To Eriksen there are four dominant though not exhaustive empirical foci of ethnic studies viz. (1) urban ethnic minorities; (2) indigenous people, particularly aboriginal inhabitants of a territory; (3) proto-nations i.e. so called ethno-nationalist movements; and (4) ethnic groups in plural societies where 'plural society' refers to colonially-created states with socially diverse populations and where secession is usually not an option and ethnicity tends to be articulated as group competition.

When matched against the regionally based manifestations of ethnic struggles, Eriksen's fourfold categorisation of the subject is too broad to capture situational particularities. Mukherji's (1994) study on the crisis that nationalism and nation building has engendered in India unveils four types of ethnicity, viz. (1) linguistic; (2) religious; (3) caste; and (4) tribal. He describes how each type of ethnicity has produced its own peculiar dimensions reflecting the complexity of historical factors, social diversity, political tensions and local, regional and national articulation of requirements and goals. Unlike Eriksen, who wrote more about what the concept ethnicity covers and consequently avoided its definition, Mukherji (1994:22) states the problematic of doing so but proposes that

> the logic of identification of an ethnic group should lie in the internalisations of cultural attributes and/or values by its members, since birth or through long socialisation.

In South Africa, the latter definition fits those groups which have laid claim to 'authentic ethnic identities', irrespective of the challenges that belie their positions. To limit Benedict Anderson's thesis concerning 'imagined communities' to only one national imagined community, in the face of such protagonists, therefore, is tantamount to a distortion of right-wing Afrikaner and Zulu claims of ethnic exclusivism. For them, such claims provision the right to self-determination. Maré (1992) gives a lucid illustration of how history, imagery and symbolism are used to articulate, assert and bargain an ethnic exclusivism in the context of corporate rights.

Almost inevitably, the quest for ethnic identity is inseparably linked to the issue of nationalism, political manipulation and a competition for power. However, there are various levels at which claims for ethnic recognition may be pitched. The nature and velocity of the claims may be determined in various ways. In his examination of the relationship of ethnicity to the democratisation of society Maré (1992) explains the need for understanding the differences between 'ethnic group' and 'ethnic category'. The former is aware of and accepts belonging together and being categorised as similar, whilst the latter is a labelling of a number of people or things according to

similar characteristics, created by an outside observer (Maré 1993:7). Both of these distinctions could serve as an indication of the limits to which requirements may be made accessible or demands may be articulated. Paul Brass (1985) suggests that ethnicity can be made to serve an 'interest group' or 'corporate rights'. In an interest group, demands are confined to mainly civil issues such as seeing to their economic well-being, especially in economic and educational opportunities, and adequate provision of health facilities and housing. In corporate demands there is a transcendence of such expectations—which may include a major say in the political system as a whole, or control over a piece of territory within the country, or a demand for a country of their own with full sovereignty (see Brass in Mukherji 1994:23).

In each of these situations, there is a further dynamic that escapes the tendency to speak generally and in broad terms about ethnicity, viz. the role of 'cultural brokers' or 'ethnic entrepreneurs' (Maré 1992:2). This limitation is almost synonymous to the 'synchronic syndrome' of freezing the time-slot. Such an approach leaves us with two problems. Firstly, ethnic demands and expectations are presented within a framework that ignores the ongoing responses and adaptations that could lead to radical transformations, and which in turn could have implications on people who are called upon to make sense of the world in particular ways. Secondly, the articulation of ethnic concerns as representations of socially undifferentiated calls for recognition, produces a homogeneity that ignores how individual styles of leadership become an expression of collective concerns. Keesing's (1985) words that 'political outcomes are often the result of individual choices and strategies' significantly express this reality. It is in this spirit that Maré (1992:52), in examining the ethnic mobilisation of the 'Zulu nation', claims that 'we have to see who the prime mobilisers are, and what interests the mobilisation serves'. From this point on he proceeds to demonstrate how the Zulu cultural organisation Inkatha, presently operating as a non-racial political party (Inkatha Freedom Party), has highlighted the centrality of a single symbol i.e. the person of Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Either as a cultural organisation or as a non-racial political party, Inkatha is viewed widely as a manifestation of Chief Buthelezi's vision of the place and role of 'the Zulus' in the wider South Africa. It is a vision that has illustrated the politicisation of ethnicity largely through Buthelezi's efforts as a cultural entrepreneur, from the platform of a distinctive organisation.

In somewhat similar situations of ethnic mobilisation amongst South Africans of Indian origin, there has been several central symbolic figures who vociferously represented their interests. However, the difference in the ethnic mobilisation between the Indians and the Zulus is that the Indians are constrained to articulate their needs as an 'interest group' whilst the Zulus are making demands in the context of 'corporate rights'. The former arises from the fact of the minority status of Indians and the latter from the Zulu's numerical strength in the country and in the Kwa-Zulu Natal region.

It is their minority status and operation as an interest group that precludes the politicisation of ethnic mobilisation amongst Indians. Instead, it enforces upon them the position of the culturalisation of ethnicity. This demonstrates a deviation from the universally politicised discourse of ethnicity. This position brings two things to the fore. Firstly, it finds itself in association with Jain's plea for a decentralised paradigm aimed at capturing India's organisation as 'unity in diversity'—a unitary state in which a diversity of languages and religions are acknowledged. Following Foucault (1986) and Bondurant (1988) Jain (1994:4) asserts that 'one may strive for the culturalisation of the ideal of national integration in India'. Bondurant's explication of Mahatma Gandhi's experiments with truth and the practice of *satyagraha*, i.e. civil disobedience through non-violence, sets the scene for a difference in approach towards national integration in South Africa, dating from 1890s. *Satyagraha* was a realisation of the force of non-cooperation with the authorities aimed at bringing about social and political change under colonial rule. In many ways, it was a result of a cultural import that was tested, adapted and flourished organically to serve the interests of the Indian minority. As such, it fits the notion of a decentralised paradigm in the context of an interest in national integration in India advocated by Jain. It is an ideal that is not inconsistent with what South Africa is presently striving for.

Secondly, the concept 'culturalisation' aims at revealing its distinctiveness from its derivatives, 'culture' and 'cultural'. The latter two concepts are an expression of norms, values and practices that occur within a synchronised time frame. They are therefore too stagnant to capture the ongoing processes of ever-changing alliance-based politics, political adaptations, and the constant reviewing of strategies and tactics by groups aiming to remain amongst the counted in ethnic mobilisation. If taken as a useful tool of analysis in studies of ethnicity, 'culturalisation' brings out the dynamism of the dialectical interactions that continuously shape and determine images and ideologies of individuals and organisations. The sections that follow attempt to capture these notions amongst those of Indian origin living in South Africa. It begins by briefly reviewing the already well documented history of Indian politics in South Africa, and is followed by a deeper immersion in the politics of a contemporary cultural entrepreneur.

A Brief History of South African Indian Politics

South African Indian politics is rooted in the humble beginnings of indentured labour and must be understood against the background of a tripartite periodisation of political activity: (1) the period between 1860 and 1894 when indentured labourers and passenger Indians had no popularly elected and authentic leadership; (2) between 1894 and 1960, when South Africa was still a British colony, Indians had to tirelessly fight for

their rights and often used their statuses as British subjects for such negotiation; (3) after 1960, when South Africa became a Republic in 1960 Indians were granted permanent citizenship about a year later but were left without any substantive political entitlements (see also Meer 1969; 1991).

The initial conditions of indentureship were harsh and insensitive to the social, economic and religious needs of Indians. Pahad (1972:12) reported that the colonists' urgent plea for indentured labour from India was not reflected in the treatment accorded to the first arrivals in 1860. They faced prolonged difficulties. A lack of food, shelter, or an interpreter left them confused and in a desolate state. Despite such constraints, the Natal Mercury had reported early in 1865 that the employment of Indian labour had increased the export of sugar by more than 300 per cent from 26 000 in 1863 to 100 000 ton in 1864. Their agricultural productivity and general contribution to the development of Natal province was sustained throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1901 the Protector of Indian Immigrants wrote that the employers realised the indispensability of Indian labour. He pointed out that if Indian labour was withdrawn, 'the country would at once be paralysed'. In 1903 Sir Leigh Hullet felt that 'Durban was absolutely built by the Indian people' (Pahad 1972:13). Such statistics and words of praise reinforced the Indian will to remain in South Africa and encouraged them to consolidate their residential statuses by demanding permanent citizenship. Prior to the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi, political representation for Indians rested more with the Protectorate from the colonial offices than with popularly acceptable or authentically elected leaders. Gandhi's arrival in 1893 and his formation of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in 1894 injected a ray of hope on the political possibilities for the Indian minority.

Since then and up to 1946 Essop Pahad had identified thirteen pressure groups and political institutions that represented the interests of Indians. In 1903 Gandhi was instrumental in founding the Transvaal Indian British Association whose structure and aims were similar to the NIC. In order to introduce a mechanism to conscientise Indians, keep them informed and sustain their struggle, he started a weekly newspaper, the Indian Opinion, on 4 June 1903. Initially it was printed in four languages viz. English, Gujerati, Hindi and Tamil, but the latter two discontinued not too long after through lack of support. By the time of the final closure of the paper in 1960, Gandhi's aim of galvanising the multi-linguistic and multi-religious groups to converge around their common problems, was to a large extent achieved.

The character of Indian leadership, the issues for which they fought and the perceptions they created amongst academics interested in their politics vary widely and are sometimes riddled with ambiguity. From four noted writers who covered Indian politics in the twentieth century up to 1960, Ngubane (see Kuper 1957), Kuper (1957; 1965), Pahad (1972) and Frederickse (1990), the former two viewed their con-

tributions as minimal and thinly spread. The latter two viewed their contributions as substantial.

Ngubane claimed that support for co-operation with Africans came mainly from the communists. He denied that Indian interests in South African politics was a popular attempt that aimed at levelling the political playing field. The view was taken further by Leo Kuper who believed that 'in the period 1937 and 1947 Indians remained politically inert' (see Pahad 1972:10). Whilst Pahad refuted this assertion by referring to the good attendance of political meetings and the formation of the Colonial Born and Settler Indian Association as proof of the popularity of political participation, his position is blurred by his inconsistency. In his introduction he claims that 'the mass protest meetings organised by the Indian political organisations were generally speaking well attended' (Pahad 1972:9). In his conclusion, after agreeing with Kuper that the SAIC and its allies were 'caucus' type bodies he declares that:

> The Congresses were not mass organisations with a viable branch system, so that decisions were largely arrived at by the small leadership which formed the executive (Pahad 1972:220).

Pahad's thesis begins proper in 1924 when the Union Government introduced the Class Areas Bill, which was the first attempt by the all White government to encourage Indians to live separately. This measure gave the regionally based South African Indian Congress (SAIC), which was formed in 1919, a springboard to launch itself as a national organisation. Amidst the objective of trying to establish the measure of Indian interest in politics, Pahad tried to do three things viz. (1) to discuss the virtual cooptation of the SAIC, and demonstrate how their moderate leadership pursued accomodationist policies with the whites, especially for the interests of the Indian business class; (2) to illustrate how the internal dynamics and contradictions of the moderates in the SAIC led to them being unseated by the radicals; and (3) to show how the radicals' adoption of universalist values of adult suffrage helped to forge closer alliances with African political movements such as the African National Congress.

Julie Frederickse (1990), in attempting to describe 'the unbreakable thread in non-racialism' in South Africa also brings out the inner tensions in the Indian political movements between the accomodationists and the radicals. She attempts to show how various pacts between the NIC and ANC, such as in the formation of the Passive Resistance Council on 13 June 1946, not only drew the disenfranchised 'racial' groups closer together, but also how the organisational skills of the Indian politicians helped to facilitate those of their African counterparts. These measures, however, should be cautiously taken as an axiomatic sign of non-racialism, especially against the publicly declared position of the NIC that collaboration with the African masses was key to

their own emancipation. This more appropriately conjures up images of expediency rather than genuine commitment. Numerous incidents allude to the sectarianism practised by the NIC leadership in the course of the twentieth century. A glaring example in the earlier years comes to the fore in lieu of this claim. In 1936 when an Agent General of India, Sir Syed Raza Ali married Miss Sammy, a Hindu, prominent Hindu leaders of the NIC resigned their official positions, apparently in protest against the marriage (Pahad 1972:141). And more recently Singh and Vawda's (1988) account of the ambiguity in the NIC's political discourse is a demonstration of the persistence of a somewhat hidden ethnic exclusivism. They illustrate how their discourse is more appropriately an articulation of Indian middle class political aspirations, which through closer analysis, contradicts their image either as a custodian of Indian aspirations or as a champion force of non-racialism in a post-apartheid South Africa.

It would be a gross distortion however to tar all of the Indian political leadership with the same brush. Aside from Gandhi, whose politics in his early years in South Africa are not without its controversies, many activists in the SAIC, NIC, TIC and other institutions have earned their reputations as legends and political mavericks in their own time. The likes of Yusuf Dadoo, Monty Naicker, A.I. Kajee, V.S.C. Pather, amongst others, are well documented and will not be rehearsed here. But suffice to say that they stand out as committed politicians whose dedication to the realisation of political emancipation for all South Africans would stand the tests of rigid scrutiny.

Through sectarianism and universalism, Indians in the struggle against White hegemony continued undeterred until the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act first outlawed the Communist Party of South Africa and subsequently, the SAIC, NIC, ANC and PAC. However diverse the personal political ideologies of Indian political leaders were, their collective contributions were had at least a threefold impact on South Africa's political landscape. Firstly, their organisational skills and articulate command of political issues substantially contributed to the joint mobilisation and resistance campaigns between Indian and African[2]. Secondly, they broadened the terrain of political resistance against White hegemony and kept their oppressors constantly alert to the problems of containment and control in a country of such social diversity. And thirdly, the experiences they acquired through their trials and tribulations served as incentives for future generation politicians who still have to deal with

[2] Within the range of political parties in South Africa, politicians from within the Indian population have found a place in each one of them. Their affiliation to each of the parties is reflective of the ideologies they choose to follow. Those who feel the need to assert minority rights more than non-racialism have affiliated to the National Party, Inkatha Freedom Party or Minority Front. While those more inclined towards the universalist ideal of non-racialism have found a place in the African National Congress, and to a much lesser extent, the Pan African Congress.

African and White opportunism, coerciveness, and subtle forms of exclusion from open economic competition. Whilst much can be written about these aspects, the sections that follow, however, are restricted to the coopted sector in South African politics since the 1960s, leading to emphasis on one particular figure.

From Tactical Cooption to Total Immersion

Since acquiring permanent citizenship in 1961, the state's dilemma of political representation for Indians was a problematic one. As an easily exploitable and vulnerable minority that was still disenfranchised, the state took it upon itself to decide what forms of political representation Indians may have. Through a process of deliberations that excluded Indians, which went on for several years and which left them leaderless for that period, the state eventually opted for a system of nominated representation. It set up the South African Indian Council in 1972 (hereafter also referred to as the SAIC), a body which produced an abbreviation of 'SAIC', which for a while confused many naive Indians as being the old South African Indian Congress. To the disenfranchised majority, the conditions for open and popular discourse was entrapped in a scenario of political paralysis. At the time the Afrikaner dominated National Party and Whites in general were like the 'impenetrable and invincible chosen few' in Africa. Yet from within the ranks of the nominated SAIC there was one, Amichand Rajbansi, who dared to challenge the exploitative social hierarchy and mutual exclusiveness that white hegemony engendered. Nicknamed 'the Raj' and 'the Bengal Tiger' he has become an unavoidable face in the landscape of South African politics.

The role of Rajbansi in the SAIC was controversial as well as challenging. His public commitment to address the inequities in South Africa, to help resolve the racial impasse, and to expose misuse of state funds as well as exploitation by big business, immediately earned him the reputation of a 'peoples politician'. By December 1974 the state was tired of Rajbansi's challenging rhetoric and responded by an alleged attempt to pseudo-democratise Indian politics by introducing another party. Rajbansi in turn offered to establish the Congress Party and vowed to use the SAIC as a platform for a non-racial society. In defiance of establishment thinking he stated:

> The Congress Party would work with the Labour Party and the Natal Indian Congress to achieve its ultimate goal .... Our policies will be the same, but the tactics will differ in certain instances (*Daily News* 30 December 1974).

This position was a source of tremendous annoyance to the White authorities and he was to pay a severe price in several arenas in his private and public life for it. In 1975 he ran a fishmonger's shop in Silverglen (an Indian group area in Durban at the

time), and was deputy chairperson of the Southern Durban Local Affairs Committee. Both of these occupations suffered. By December of that year his application for a butcher's licence was refused by the Livestock and Meat Industry Control Board (*Natal Mercury* 3 December 1975). By March 1976 Rajbansi's financial interests were being probed by a one person Commission of Enquiry, Mr. W.H. Booysen, who had to act on allegations of him not declaring all of his financial interests as a public servant. Mr. Booysen recommended suspension of Rajbansi for the rest of the Local Affairs Committee's (LAC)[3] term of office (*Natal Mercury* 17 March 1976). The efforts to frustrate him out of politics continued. In April 1976 the *Post* reported that there were secret moves to oust Rajbansi from the Natal regional executive of the SAIC. After a heated debate with two SAIC executives, whom the newspaper described as 'ultra conservatives', viz. J.B. Patel and A.M. Moola, he stormed out and told the former who was committee chairman: 'Carry on this way and Pretoria will give you your nomination for 1977'.

Rajbansi refused to heed calls for an apology and vowed to continue fighting their conservatism. His attitude continued to be a source of contention for many, which led to a cabinet council colleague Ismail Kathrada once again challenging Rajbansi to resign from the executive committee. Kathrada accused Rajbansi of wanting to wreck the SAIC and launch a new party.

Rajbansi appeared to challenge colleagues in the Cabinet Council and the broader membership of the SAIC. He seems to have tested their popularity, through public rebuffs about their legitimacy, before entering into negotiations for a new constitution with the White government. In one week he was quoted twice on this sentiment. On 10 August 1976 the *Natal Mercury* reported him saying:

> I believe that the SAIC is struggling to find public acceptability, and before we involve ourselves in any evolutionary step, we will have to get a mandate from our people.

Eight days later on 18 August 1976 the *Post* reported him saying:

> In view of the general conditions in our country at this particular period, it would be unwise to serve on the Cabinet Council, on which every race group in South Africa is not represented.

[3] Under apartheid (legalised and institutionalised system of social discrimination), elections for local political offices took place for Whites only. For Coloureds and Indians, LACs were set up and comprised of co-opted nominated members to represent their interests. But they were hardly capable of influencing policy and implementation. For Africans, Community Councils were likewise established. The first non-racial local government elections only took place in November 1995.

Rajbansi's firmness against the state's apparatuses and their functioning was glaringly critical. He continued to voice concerns about their handling and general abrogation of their responsibilities of Indian education, housing, health and other social services. He accused the state in mid 1977 of spending twenty one million rands on unnecessary shopping complexes for displaced Indian businessmen. This happened while there were twenty five thousand applications for accommodation, of which eighty percent were of sub-economic status in Durban alone.

Whilst Rajbansi's vociferous attacked and undermined the very institutions from which he worked, and continued to annoy the people with whom he worked, his popularity with the constituency appeared to consolidate itself. This was irksome to both his Indian colleagues within the SAIC and LAC and his White political masters. Their concern was expressed by caucusing against him and calling for his suspension for the second time in two years from the Southern Durban Local Affairs Committee (SDLAC), (*Daily News* 15 September 1977). The constituency's and Rajbansi's responses to this were swift and interesting. More than eight hundred people met at the Montford Mosque Hall to protest his suspension, and five thousand people in his constituency of Arena Park, signed a petition asking the Administrator General to reconsider the decision. The appeal met a negative response. But the disqualification gave rise to an historic event in that Rajbansi's wife was nominated unopposed and became the first South African woman on an LAC.

Rajbansi was undeterred by the suspension and returned to politics, but somewhat watered down. In an attempt to broaden the 'non-white' political base, he continued with his old political alliances outside the Indian fold, especially with Chief Mangosutho Buthelezi. As public relations officer for the now defunct exclusively Indian Reform Party, he successfully drew a large crowd of three thousand five hundred people to host a public meeting in Chatsworth with Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi and two hundred of his followers. At the meeting, Rajbansi addressed the issue of Indian disunity and suggested that the various factions get together under Buthelezi's chairmanship (*Post* 26 March 1980). This event also appeared to have marked a shift in Rajbansi's political agenda. At around this period, Indian and Coloured schools were on boycott and they targeted the state-created institutions such as the SAIC, LACs and their allies, and the individuals who made them functional. Maximum public mileage was sought out of the visit and the meal the then Minister of Indian Affairs, Marais Steyn, had at Rajbansi's house (*Sunday Tribune* 11 May 1980), whilst the restlessness at Indian educational institutions continued. Numerous working dinners with White officials followed this event. It reached quite a height in May 1983 when the then Minister of Internal Affairs, F.W. de Klerk (presently Deputy State President), with two hundred other guests from designated racial categories, was invited by Rajbansi for a meal. He defended the event as an exercise in inter-racial socialising. These

events are symptomatic of a persevering survivor in politics. It may be construed as ironical that the very one who ought to have been removed from politics had their hearts and minds won over through their this meal. The culinary skills of his wife and the persuasiveness of spicy Indian cooking to the western tongue had helped to cement a firm bond between himself and powerful political figures in the National Party. The dividends that were paid through this bond interestingly brought Rajbansi to declare some eleven years later that curry is an important negotiating instrument (*Sunday Tribune* 2 December 1994).

But by this time (i.e. mid 1983), Rajbansi's persistent challenging of the legitimacy of the SAIC and LAC systems was astutely absent from his public discourse. Then then State President, P.W. Botha, was anxious to work out a new constitution with nominated persons from the Indian and Coloured populations. Rajbansi was keen to be on this team and prior to a visit to West Germany for a conference on 'South Africa 1983: Latest Developments, Problems and Perspectives', he affirmed his determination to participate despite the anticipated opposition. Herein lay his first sign of capitulation. He said that the SAIC might ask to scrap plans for a referendum among the Indian community if pressure was going to be brought by opposing groups to boycott participation for a new constitution—which excluded Africans. He threatened to resort to asking the government to use the findings of a 'scientific survey' to justify the SAIC's collaboration with P.W. Botha's government. The unpopularity of this decision was clearly noticeable in the broad pathetic community response to the SAIC. In effect, it constituted a reverse of the popular support he once enjoyed.

Evidently, the Natal Indian Congress was virtually silent about Rajbansi's participation in state structures whilst he tried to fight the system from within. But his about-turn against a referendum and his obstinacy about participating in the proposed tricameral parliamentary system ruffled many feathers within the NIC. His trip to Germany was used to vilify him. The 'first' public signs of the NIC's critique of Rajbansi surfaced when they reviled him for travelling to Germany in a nominated rather than elected capacity. They called on the ythen Paris Mayor, Jacques Chirac, to snub him because he conspired with the state to fine people for not registering as voters. The NIC claimed that ninety two percent of the Indian community boycotted the LAC elections in 1982 (*Daily News* 2 October 1983). Rajbansi was further attacked for praising P.W. Botha and for behaving as an apologist for apartheid overseas (*Daily News* 16 October 1983). He weathered the storm of criticisms and went on to participate in the negotiations for the new dispensation, out of which emerged the 1984 elections for the tricameral parliament. Like the 1982 LAC elections the response for this nominated system of politics was clearly far below an acceptable level of participation. In Rajbansi's own constituency there was a fourteen percent voters turn-out. But, on his leaving for parliament in Cape Town, a staged group of three hundred people pitched up to wish him farewell.

In excluding South Africa's majority and creating a system through which to control and contain two minorities—Coloureds and Indians—the tricameral system was a unique constitutional experiment by the dominant Whites. It was composed of the House of Assembly (HOA) for Whites, the House of Representatives (HOR) for Coloureds (people of mixed descent), and the House of Delegates (HOD) for Indians. The entire structure was made-up of a system of proportional representation, with whites enjoying the balance of forces in their favour. Each House had the responsibility of controlling their 'Own Affairs' such as housing, health and welfare, and education. Collectively, the houses had to constitute a task of ensuring that Indians and Coloureds became cohesive administrative units. The House of Delegates was dominated by two parties viz. Solidarity, led by businessman J.N. Reddy, and the National Peoples Party (NPP), led by Rajbansi. Both parties defended their position in parliament as a preferable strategy to boycott- politics. The overall argument was that their constituencies could benefit in the short-term in having immediate community needs met such as housing and welfare.

At the time of these elections Rajbansi was on a political high and rode on that ticket to become the leader of the NPP, which became the controlling party in the HOD. However, as Moodley (1989) noted, racial self-administration had revived long forgotten sectarian cleavages within the Indian group. Moodley's paper on 'Cultural Politics' captures some of the dynamics of the level of politics that dominated the House of Delegates during its term. He demonstrated how Indians who were once considered unworthy of citizenship gave the proclaimed multiculturalism of the apartheid strategists visibility and justification. They were a group without a homeland who fitted into the grand apartheid scheme of a 'nation of minorities'. The extension of state patronage drove wedges into the social heterogeneity of Indians. Whilst Indians share a common geographical origin, political exclusion, and minority status, the class discrepancies and wide social differentiation makes it difficult to arrive at a concept of community that could fall prey to the often misguided notion of homogeneity. This differentiation was especially evident in the ethnic make- up of the two dominant parties. J.N. Reddy's party Solidarity was made-up of individuals from the majority Tamil-speaking community, while Rajbansi's NPP were mainly from the minority Hindi speaking community. The NPP's dominance in the HOD was perceived as disproportionate representation of the two major linguistic groups. Once in parliament, Rajbansi tried to make good his promise of rectifying the misdeeds of apartheid, especially in the areas of education and allocation of land[4]. But an opposition member in the HOD

[4] Education in the years of apartheid meant that Whites got the biggest share of the education budget; and the availability of land for housing, commerce and industry was restricted by an artificially created shortage through the Group Areas Act of 1950. The Act legislatively separated residential and commercial areas by race.

claimed that new forms of nepotism according to linguistic and caste criteria were being used. For instance, he claimed that one hundred and eighty seven people with the surname 'Maharaj' were promoted in the teaching fraternity in one year (Moodley 1989:98).

The fiasco over nepotistic practices filtered into every possible crevice in HOD self administration. The media abounded with claims of corruption and patronage in the HOD. By 1988 the situation had reached a climax with politics stooping down to the level of continuous character assassinations between the leaders of the two parties. The fight was especially between Rajbansi and Pat Poovalingum from Solidarity, whose unbridled attacks of each other reduced their images to less than professional politicians.

A one person Commission of Enquiry, led by Judge Neville James was appointed by the then State President, P.W. Botha to investigate this situation. After the investigation, Judge James described Rajbansi as

> an arrogant, unscrupulous ... ruthless mean minded bully who should not be employed in any post which calls for integrity (*Natal Witness* 23 February 1993).

President Botha was left with no choice but to dismiss Rajbansi from three positions viz. from the cabinet, as Chairman of the Minister's Council, and as Minister of Housing in the HOD, with effect from 1 January 1989. People from within and outside widely applauded the decision. But Rajbansi defiantly vowed to continue with his political career. He affirmed: 'My career continues .... I cannot be put down. I have had setbacks in my life before' (*Post* 21 December 1988).

The press was particularly incisive about Rajbansi's future role in politics. Under the caption 'No tears for the Raj', a *Post* reporter said:

> Mr. Rajbansi, as must be expected will undoubtedly defend himself against the judge's findings, such is the pugnacious character of the man. The judge's further recommendation that his report be referred to the Attorney General to consider whether criminal prosecutions should be instituted, should be the logical next step .... The recommendations must surely mean Mr. Rajbansi's final exit from a system he so stoutly defended.

The *Daily News* (2 February 1989) reported:

> The report will do much to clear the air. It will help to clean up the political and administrative mess in the House of Delegates. It justifies the initial action of the State President, Mr. P.W. Botha, in removing Mr. Rajbansi from the cabinet. And it is to be hoped the government accepts the recommendation that he be excluded from ever holding public office.

In a revolt that occurred within the NPP, Rajbansi was forced to step down. But there was none who could step into the position of this maverick.

Rajbansi's refusal to resign from political life was daunting to his opposition. They found themselves helpless in trying to achieve their desire of permanently removing him from office. It was reported later that month that

> Mr. Rajbansi's politically devious mind is probably amused at the decision by the House of Delegates to suspend him for the present sitting of parliament. Members decided they could not strip him of his membership of the House because he would simply stand for re-election in his Arena Park constituency and probably win (*Sunday Tribune Herald Viewpoint* 26 February 1989).

Within two months Rajbansi was reinstated as leader of the NPP. This permitted him re-entry into Parliament. Disappointed that his recommendations were not carried through, Judge James said:

> He is an inordinately ambitious man obsessed with the desire to achieve personal power and is ruthless in its pursuit (*Sunday Tribune Herald* 23 April 1989).

The balance of power in the HOD eventually tilted in favour of Solidarity, and P.W. Botha, after having suffered a stroke, was replaced by F.W. de Klerk through a clandestine *coup d'état*. Once again the press abounded with stories of Indian members of parliament continuously crossing the floor to join opposition parties and Rajbansi persistently trying to hold on to power in the HOD. Eventually he lost all of his members to other parties, including the Afrikaner dominated National Party, thereby making him the only member of his party. One of the latter's members, Jaco Maree, once remarked: 'Amichand Rajbansi is the leader of the loneliest party in the world', to which Rajbansi replied 'You are rubbish'—a rare challenge indeed from an Indian to an Afrikaner politician. But a more ominous statement was made by another White politician (whose political career itself was a rather chequered one), Dennis Worral. He said: 'Mr. Rajbansi will come back into politics as a personality while Mr. Maree will sink like a stone'.

To date, Dennis Worral's statement remains correct.

From Uncertainty to the Minority Front

F.W. de Klerk's presidency was a turning point in South Africa's history. In seeing to the demise of apartheid he also had to see to the dismantling of the tricameral parliamentary system. Since the unbanning of the ANC on 2 February 1990 until early 1994, Rajbansi persevered as a one-person team and as the sole representative of the

NPP in parliament. Undeterred by his status as a minority, he carried himself through various negotiating forums amidst varying responses of annoyance and admiration at his presence. Soon after the unbanning of the African National Congress, other extra-parliamentary movements, and the release of the high profile political detainees including Nelson Mandela, the Conference for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) was set up to negotiate the future of the country. It subsequently entered into a prolonged process that split it into CODESA 1 and CODESA 2. Both initiatives were unable to reach consensus on how to reshape and to redirect South Africa. However, the assassination of the ANC's chief military commander Chris Hani, turned the stalemate around when the South African Communist leader Joe Slovo called for a multi-party conference that will lead to the election of a democratic government. Here again Rajbansi was permitted to participate. But the Indian population was divided amidst calls for either his continued presence or expulsion from the multi-party conference. In one newspaper its editorial page carried a caption: 'Is this the end of the Bengal Tiger?', heading a letter from Rajbansi to the editor. It was a response to a reader who called for his withdrawal from the conference. It read

> For the benefit of the writer who belongs to a small clique that has failed to deliver the Indian community to a liberation as promised, and to others, I say that the 'Bengal Tiger's' real political career has just commenced (*Post* 29 September 1993).

Rajbansi sat through this process and played his role strategically in order to redefine his position in that swiftly transforming political terrain. There was eventual agreement that the first non-racial election in South Africa take place on 27 April 1994. The press engaged in random guessing about which side of the political spectrum Rajbansi was likely to swing to, although they undoubtedly reflected upon his own uncertainty. Early in 1993 he reached out to test the ANC's public opinion on him joining them, 'but definitely not the Nats' (de Klerk's National Party). One ANC member responded by laughing while another suggested that he was free to join through the normal channels, but recalled the denigrating words of the James Commission about Rajbansi (*Natal Witness* 23 February 1993). The very next day he was reported in the *Post* as making a plea to his conventional enemies, the NIC and TIC, about strengthening the Indian political movements, despite the fact that they might be ANC inclined. He justified his call by referring to incumbent policies of an impending Black-dominated government which was likely to act in favour of Africans on affirmative action, job reservations, education, housing, and other social services. He believed that in the next five years strong minority movements will emerge in South Africa, although at that point, he did not feel it was appropriate to form a political party to represent Indian interests in the April 1994 elections (*Post* 24 February 1993).

Rajbansi continued to waver from strengthening his ties with other Indian-dominated political movements, to wanting to join the ANC, to wanting to form a united front of minority movements to participate in collective bargaining for minority rights. The latter was attempted through several initiatives, but to no resounding response. In a letter to the editor of the *Post* (29 September 1993) he stated 'I have announced the formation of a non-racial United Minority Front ...', whilst two months later in an invitation to the ANC to join him in a spirit of reconciliation in Chatsworth, he announced the formation of a National Minority Front. One hundred and fifteen attended the meeting, and he drew the loudest applause from them when he attacked the National Party for not ensuring that the interests of the Indian religion were not entrenched in the interim constitution. Rajbansi continued with several meetings in different areas in the KwaZulu-Natal region. Despite a still evidently undefined position, he continued in the fashion of an electioneering campaign.

The answer to Rajbansi's political future appeared to have come to him when he had to fall back on a letter written to him via the press by a University of Durban-Westville academic, Dr. T. Naidoo. Appealing to Rajbansi to represent the Indians in the multi-party negotiations, Dr. Naidoo pleaded:

> Our political future is desperately bleak. We have no leader and still less do we have any people of any political worth capable of speaking for us with any political maturity when the talks really get going (*Post* 3 March 1993).

A positive reply to Dr. Naidoo's letter was printed in the Post a fortnight later when a reader stated:

> It has taken time but I'm glad to note that people are beginning to see that Mr. Rajbansi is the only Indian leader who speaks and means well (*Post* 17 March 1993).

Up to November 1993 there still appeared to have been overtures to join the ANC dominated Patriotic Front, which was made up of at least one hundred organisations. As the year 1994 unfolded and election fever speeded the process towards its due date, the fate of the Minority Front was still undecided. On 23 January 1994 the *Sunday Tribune* reported that Rajbansi was in demand by the ANC and Pan African Congress (PAC). In the same week, the *Daily News* (2 February 1994) reported:

> Ever the survivor Mr. Rajbansi had in recent months appeared to be moving closer to different parties at different times.

However, the overtures to lure Rajbansi towards the ANC to capture the Indian vote was put to an abrupt end when Indian ANC members threatened to resign if he was coopted.

Unable to attract other minorities to his fold or to get onto the platform of the Patriotic Front, Rajbansi had to shed the prefixes of 'United' or 'National' and settled for the 'Minority Front'. Under this banner, he proceeded to the first historical non-racial election. In his terms, it was a 'political movement', although in constitution, in goals and in rhetoric it was the realisation of one man's conceptualisation of what an Indian minority party should represent. Realising his limited potential, he put up a list of thirty candidates for the KwaZulu-Natal region, twenty two for the national candidature, and twenty five for the national-regional arena. With these, he aimed to capture at least one hundred and fifty thousand votes from the Indian population in order to acquire two seats on the national legislature and two seats on the regional one. Rajbansi positioned himself as the leader on all the lists, and perhaps found himself in no other position because they were all unknown people with no commendable background of community participation. Indians in the KwaZulu-Natal region make up twelve per cent of the voting population, of which Rajbansi was able to capture 1.3% (or 48 951) votes of the total. This won him only one seat in the KwaZulu-Natal provincial parliament.

In confirming his intention to launch the Minority Front he promised that one of the tasks from this platform

> will be to take on Durban's customs officials who are allegedly discriminating against Indian women who arrive with their purchases from the east (*Natal Mercury* 20 October 1993).

Throughout his election campaign and also after the election, Rajbansi continuously singled out issues that are of an historically sensitive nature to Indians in South Africa. Whilst pledging to fight for Indian fishermen who were being victimised by White Natal Parks Board officials—who allegedly excuse White fishermen for similar offences—and pledging to bring Indian movie stars to South Africa, he sees it as his task to reassure Indians of their rights and integrity as a minority group, and of their safety under a black- dominated government. His frequent expression of dissatisfaction about the new government's policy of affirmative action is effectively used as a yardstick to demonstrate his determination to expose the insensitivity towards the historically disadvantaged situation in which Indians found themselves under White domination. Within the ranks of his party, the only woman representative based her campaign on a religious platform and crusaded for 'the separation of the races'. A housewife and mother of five from the working-class Indian township of Phoenix, Mrs. Ban Haripersadh called for an exclusion of Indians and Coloureds from the label, 'Black'. She claimed that through religion she could show how the substantive cultural differences create the conditions and need for exclusive existences of the

various 'racial groups'. In more ways than one, Ban Haripersad's campaign reflects the concerns about which Indians in South Africa are so anxious viz. fears of being overshadowed by a black majority or possible domination by other competing ethnic formations; survival of religion, languages and social institutions; and the maintenance of an identity—whether imagined or not.

Conclusion

Throughout all the trials and tribulations that Rajbansi has undergone, they served to strengthen his perseverance as a politician and his beliefs about his role among those of Indian origin. While his position is largely one of a cultural entrepreneur, the way in which he goes about articulating the needs of Indians does indeed capture their broader political expectations and aspirations. Through participation in cooptive politics and acceptance of a secondary role in national politics during the apartheid era, Rajbansi and his colleagues have distinctly marked out a path for Indians as a community that can operate only, in Paul Brass's terms, as an 'interest group'. While his claims for democracy shifted between calls for non-racialism and recognition of 'minority rights' his image was bleached as one with a spurious commitment to honest politics. But the path that he chose was essentially a non-violent one that is limited to rhetoric rather than being extended to violent options.

More broadly, group consciousness amongst those of Indian origin in South Africa has heightened significantly through the activities of cultural entrepreneurs such as Rajbansi. The historical events in the Baltic states, Eastern Europe, India and Sri Lanka, and the aggressive and often violent demands by Zulu and Afrikaner nationalists for control and autonomy over large vestiges of territory has no doubt stimulated and strengthened the call by many Indian South Africans for their greater recognition. For instance, when Rajbansi showed pride in being called the 'Bengal Tiger' and 'the Raj', simultaneously sought to gain restitution of land for the victims of the 1950 Group Areas Act, chastised the National Party for not including Indian religions in the new Interim Constitution, and took up the struggle in Indian education on behalf of its teachers, he was making effective political statements through the medium of raising historically contentious issues. However, his more culturally oriented role in his representation of concerns for Indians is vividly captured, in for instance, his declaration that curry is an important negotiating instrument, his promise to fight for Indian women and their overweight baggage at the airports when they return from the near and far eastern countries, his stated intention to bring popular Indian movie stars to South Africa, and his determination to defend the rights of Indian fishermen. His political stature is reassuring when he highlights the plight of the Indian youth's prospects of employment and challenges the present government's policy of affirmative

action in employment, but simultaneously tries to reassure Indian South Africans of their safety under a Black- dominated government. His dubiousness, however, is noted in his visible silence when one of his party's candidates openly propagates policies of segregation.

In reifying these issues, Rajbansi's profile brings to light the dynamism of the culturalisation of politics and demonstrates how the role of the cultural entrepreneur is inseparably linked to the political process. He is simultaneously sending out at least three resounding messages. Firstly, he is conveying to Indians his understanding and appreciation of their concerns and his willingness to fight for them. Secondly, he is actually capturing and articulating the level at which Indians wish to make their demands as an 'interest group'. Through his representation, although not excluding wider calls from the community to the contrary, the state's committee responsible for drawing up the new constitution has called for issues of concern to Indians to be brought to their attention, such as language and religion. Thirdly, fundamental to all that has been discussed here, is the inescapability of the strength of ethnicity as a force in national and global politics. Together, these three factors feed into the process of the culturalisation of politics. It demonstrates the practicality of at least two writers' words of wisdom: (1) in Graham Howe's terms, for a new civil society which reconciles interests and identities at the local and regional levels with a new South Africanism at the national level; and (2) in Mukherji's terms with reference to the Indian sub-continent, for the creation of 'democratic space' in which greater recognition is given to social formations that prefer to define themselves in terms of language, religion, common origin or otherwise within the framework of national politics.

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