

Identities within the Rainbow

Arise ye Coolies:

Apartheid and the Indian 1960-1995.

by Ashwin Desai

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Every book carries the marks of its antecedents, its particular history and location, and nowhere is this truer than in the contested ground of South African history and politics. Ashwin Desai's book revolves around the theme of identity and, in particular, the curious fact that in many peculiar ways ethnic identities have been reinforced and recast in the politics of the New South Africa. The Rainbow South Africanism which is widely acclaimed as the subordination and submergence of race is shown to stand on ethnic feet. The book carries this explanation through by way of illustration from the politics of identity of Indian people in South Africa. These broad and compelling interests are tightly linked to the very concrete experiences of life and struggle at the University of Durban-Westville in the introduction where present concerns and distant history are interwoven in the broad sweep drawing us into the theme of the book. *Arise* is among the early texts to attempt to bring to the surface the subterranean textures and feelings of the transition. The obsession with identity during this period is explained:

We over-indulge in the symbols of the new for we are tired now from incessant struggle. We long for a secure identity to house us and make us safe (p. iii).

Two approaches develop within the book, *firstly*, the history of the appalling conditions of indentured labour of Indian workers, the merchant-dominated politics that emerged before the turn of the century, the politics of collaboration and resistance; and *secondly*, an examination of the current political milieu from the perspective of those critical of the communal basis of political mobilisation. Desai reveals incisively the contradiction between the Rainbowism of the elite which draws on the symbolic discourse of sports and national ritual such as the Presidential inauguration (which is imaginatively dissected) and the ethnic politics being constructed for the majority as an alternative to the class politics of opposition.

This is not a book in which conclusions are hidden in ambiguous phrases. The author writes in an uncomplicated, polemical and accessible style; from an intimate introduction in which the author bursts through the pages to a conclusion in which the symbolic roots of Rainbowism are uncovered and its political effects savaged. Between these two ends, vignettes are presented of the desperate lives of the indentured labourers, a critique is made of the encapsulation of resistance within ethnic bounds, we are appalled by the buffoonery and farcical exchanges of the collaborators in the Indian 'House of Delegates', and there is a lively analysis of the sociology, psychology and history of Indian support for the National Party in the general election. All of this is entertainingly presented and carries the reader briskly to the political conclusion.

Briefly the argument is that while Rainbowism is intoxicating it is distilled by the need to accommodate the interests of established power and wealth in South Africa. This discourse rewards those who are 'more inward-looking, traditional and exclusive', and despite the appeals to a common nationality, ethnicity is being reinforced. For all its apparent universality, racial stereotypes are being allowed to fester, and (in a disturbing metaphor) 'different racial flowers' blossom. But this process is marked by contradiction, as leaders become estranged from the communities they are imagined to represent. For instance, a spin-off of this process is that Indian politicians are alienated from their 'constituency', and for many the old collaborators such as Rajbansi are seen as the defender of the interests of Indian people. The New reinforces the Old. Desai argues that it is precisely these ideologies and processes which are causing a breakdown in the idea of non-racial unity and class politics and that this is a deliberate demobilisation in the face of a capitalist programme of austerity and privatisation.

One of the contradictions of our time is that institutions and movements initiated to bring change can become the most effective barrier to the realisation of their dreams. Trade union leaders decline support for decisive strikes (such as the colossal battle of British miners against Thatcher's attacks) and 'Communist' Parties defend capitalist policies (as in various countries of Eastern Europe). The analogy can be extended to the politics of liberation. Indians form what Benedict Anderson terms an imagined community, one constructed from the collusion between 'history and the modernising narratives of citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation state' (p. 104). From the foundation of Anderson's approach, Desai argues that the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) which led the opposition of Indian people to segregation and apartheid 'fell victim to its own success in privileging an Indian identity'.

He states that when they arrived in South Africa, Indian people did not have a cohesive identity and now they do; a fact which has reactionary

consequences for our politics. This has been derived not only from the external interference of the apartheid state in structuring 'community', but also from the impulses within the community to organise around common communal grievances rather than to adopt a broader class approach. The resistance itself becomes involved in appeals to traditions of resistance, communitarian and family values, ethnicity, language, religion and experiences of persecution, around which Rinder argues a subjectivity congeals, which constitutes the experience of being in the 'middle'.

The matter is complex, as the NIC was originally and self-consciously the mouthpiece of the merchant class and an active opposition emerged from the educated elite to its conservatism. Yet the radicals set out to build a more effective unity of the Indian community and 'reaching out to the Indian underclass, they eschewed a class politics for a politics of "the Indian"' (p. 110). Within alliances a 'more defined, dynamic and self-conscious minority identity arises' (p. 93). Resistance reinforces broad divisions. There was not an altogether exclusive approach to resistance, however, and in the 1950s a 'peculiar brand of racial separateness and togetherness' characterised the Congress Alliance. Yet in this way even resistance to racial exploitation took on a culture in step with racial identity rather a common identity of the oppressed. The book contains fascinating material on the critical debates about the membership and orientation of the NIC from its relaunch in the early 1970s, when a decision was taken by a narrow majority against the opposition of black consciousness groupings, to limit its membership to Indian people. In itself this might not have solved the problem of Indian-African unity, but it would at least have laid a marker against ethnic politics and possibly explored, decades ago, the problem of unity among black people which has still to be achieved in the Natal region.

A review of the politics of identity and liberation has to confront the very specific questions which are raised to throw a class perspective into doubt, and in this book the question is why a large majority of Indian people voted for a party

that had forced them from their traditional residential areas, denied them trading rights, jailed and banned their leaders and generally treated them as second class citizens? (p. 95).

This fact posed a major difficulty for the African National Congress. After the elections Mandela is quoted saying that 'Indian and Coloured communities identified themselves with the oppressors' and that this 'has created problems for me in promoting a spirit of reconciliation' (p 88).

Desai argues that the 'still-intact structure of cultural and racial identity' (p. 118) is real and pervasive, and that racial exclusivity and taboo

continue. Far from race and ethnicity being related to the past, these features 'are increasingly being reassigned political value' (p. 115). All these effects are related to the cause: the over-riding priority of stabilisation around the old inequalities and identities. He goes so far as to state that the

the Apartheid attribute of race with all its artificiality and eugenic connotations ... are now lauded and rewarded as correct and respectable (p. 119).

The new Rainbow political structure is built on the blocks of separate identities. These social identities in the New South Africa carry their own pervasive logic.

The peculiar and contradictory consequence of this development has been that a majority of votes of Indian people during the general election of April 1994 went to the National Party which had promised to repatriate Indians when it came to power in 1948. Much of the thrust of the argument of the book is expended in explaining this particular contradiction which has had severe consequences in national politics, including the failure of the ANC to win KwaZulu/Natal.

Desai insists against more conservative commentators that the voting pattern of Indian people as among others is a 'complex sociological and psychological trajectory and *not* the result of any primordial essence or propensity' (p. 124). He makes an explanation for this phenomenon at a number of levels. Firstly, Indians can be seen as a 'middleman' minority which occupies an intermediate rather than a low-status position, and these minorities serve as scapegoats par excellence (especially as the vulnerable 'economic villain') who put a face to economic distress 'rather than ... remote, complex and hardly comprehensible forces' (p. 89). Secondly, the very logic of apartheid which systematically destroyed viable multi-racial communities and forced group separation led to a 'vivid group identity' coalescing around separate residential areas, schools, newspapers, and TV.

Thirdly, Desai employs Reich's theorising of the irrational, the character of people in mass psychology which is in Reich's terms 'totally dependent on authority, incapable of freedom and extremely accessible to mysticism' (p. 97). Innermost thoughts are governed by 'psychic processes that take place unconsciously and are therefore not accessible to conscious control' (p. 97). Reich's argument is most cogent in relation to the family and attitudes to female sexuality. In following through this argument Desai argues Indian families are 'notoriously disciplinarian *and* self-absorbed' and that family relations are 'tight and oppressive' (p. 98).

The retreat into the family, the leaving intact of family hierarchies—is perhaps a major reason, ironically for Indian support for the NP nationally (p. 101).

Finally, Desai argues that Indian Culture is conservative, that it is part of a 'womblike structure'. Equally the political culture is conservative as progressive Indian organisations built 'a homogenous Indian identity in order to confront the State more forcefully' (p. 104). Around common persecution there was a forging of defensive strategies but within a definition of a community imagined around the confines of Indians.

Desai argues that the success of new identity politics is marked by 'a resounding absence of criticism' from intellectuals. Many intellectuals are seeking an answer to the compelling questions of identity by posing multiple identities or layers of identity, or by posing the issue as situational: that people are adopting the appropriate identity to the time and place leaving identity fluid. The question still remains that of deciding which are the primary and the secondary questions. The issue is more than one of social surveys and mass psychology; it is one which is posed within a living ideological environment in which socialist ideas are ridiculed, working class unity decried as absurd, and the values of money are absolute. How can a worker from a minority owe loyalty to an identity which is being denied by the majority? If the social milieu is polarised ethnically, how can class politics survive and prosper?

The book has much to do with the sociological diagnosis of the Rainbow phenomenon, but it concludes with a political statement which is bound to be controversial. Desai concludes with an argument for a new politics to be born around the issues of economic and political deprivation, and for activists to enter terrain 'Indian', 'even if that base is initially reactionary' (p. 125). Although he starts with an approach to the new Indian working class politics, his perspective is one which will go beyond the factory; and agitate for rebellion in the family, the squatter camp and street corner. Desai sees opposition arising among the disposed, in the

nooks and crannies there is revulsion and revolution brewing. Yearning. And it is here where we struggle; to shatter the prism of the rainbow (p. 126).

Arise is a serious attempt to describe and draw a perspective on the querulous state of the present South African political climate from the history of the Indian people, one which delineates the fault lines between ethnic and class identity and offers a prognosis for struggle for the dispossessed. He forecasts:

Once the South African political situation is stabilised and its markets secured, South Africa's internal bourgeoisie will renege from their feel-good, RDP-style social investment pledges and the fight for survival will be on (p. 117).

The recent decision of Cyril Ramaphosa to leave politics with the approval

of the President, to engage in the field of 'black empowerment' in the boardroom battles to construct corporate pyramids which provide the illusion of participation in the economy for the black majority, is the general trend of the Rainbow politics of the elite. This Rainbow opportunity displaces entirely the question of nationalisation and opens the door to privatisation through the enrichment of a black elite. While many politicians have sought the soft seats of corporations, none have turned to mobilise the working class to ensure delivery of jobs, houses, and decent wages. The espousing of transcendental national goals with enrichment on the basis of ethnic mobilisation is a confirmation of the process outlined in the last chapter. The winding up of the RDP as a coherent package of reform is another.

Rainbowism is predominantly a discourse to displace the concerns of the African majority from the centre stage of politics in the interests of wider unity between the races. As disappointment mounts with the lack of transformation of the conditions for this majority it may dissolve into Africanism or class discourse. *Arise* is a voice for a return to class politics.

Short Stories From Mozambique

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edited by Richard Bartlett

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This is a collection of short stories by Mozambican writers, representing in a general way, different moments in the development of fiction in Mozambique.

Sixteen authors make their appearance and one may question the basis on which some were selected: Leite de Vasconcelos is better known as a poet and Helder Muteia as a poet and author of tales with a socio-cultural character, while Lina Magaias' texts are reportage rather than fiction.

The reader is also rather left in the dark with regard to the criteria used for placing the stories in their present order. One is left with the vague