Ann Marie Bissessar & John Gaffar La Guerre

Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana: Race and Politics in Two Plural Societies.
Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2013. 203 pp. (Cloth US$65.00)

This book demonstrates just how far and how fast the study of the Indian communities in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana has evolved. In 1968 Krishna Bahadoorsingh published a ground-breaking book, and this was followed in 1971 by an even more impressive one by Yogendra Malik who was Indian by birth and education. Both dealt with the Indian population of Trinidad as minorities; Malik in particular was adamant that the island’s Indian leadership was suffering from a “minority complex” and an inherent fear of the Negro majority. Since these pioneering works we have witnessed the rise of many solid studies in what can now truly be called the field of comparative Indian studies in Trinidad and Guyana. An example of excellence in that field is the 1989 study by Percy C. Hintzen, often cited in the volume under review.

Bissessar and La Guerre make good use of this literature and contribute new materials and ideas at both theoretical and descriptive levels. Specialists are certain to benefit from two excellent chapters: Chapter 4, “The Mechanics of Power,” and Chapter 5, “The Triumph Over Race.” Indeed, the authors’ findings and conclusions might well be useful in further comparisons with other Indian communities such as those in Mauritius and Fiji. That said, this is not a book for the novice seeking an introduction to racial politics in Trinidad and Tobago (TT) and Guyana. It is, in fact, difficult reading since it seems to assume that most readers are au courant with these rich materials. Two stylistic weaknesses and one substantive one contribute to making the book a difficult read. The propensity to introduce key actors and political groups by just their last names or abbreviations, without any further clarification, is confusing. Thus, “Manley,” “Adams,” “Gomes,” “Robinson,” or COP, MND, DNA among many other such references leave you seeking clarification. There is also the discomfortingly repeated use of the bridging phrase, “it should be recalled” (pp. 26, 139, 155, 164, 188). Since you can only recall what you already know, the novice is often left in the dark.

The substantive critique deals with a glaring contradiction in the attribution of race as a driver of political behavior. Repeatedly in the introduction and conclusion the authors maintain that “there is no necessary determinism between race and political alignment” (p. 185). In between, the narrative deals at length with racial (or as the authors called them “tribal”) alignments. After every pause in the Indian-Black competition, things are said to return “to their natural habitats” (p. 149). Race is dealt with throughout the work as the critical “predisposing” or “triggering” factor. Bissessar and La Guerre are quite clear as
to why this has been so. The size of a racial community, they say, “was taken, by the ambitious elites, as an indication of its potential power” (p. 18). The rapidly changing demographics will insure that the push for “tribal” dominance will continue. In the late 1960s, Yogendra Malik confronted an Indian community that was 36 percent of the population, versus 43 percent for the Negro, and while its members wished to be “Westernized” they resisted being “creolized” if that meant “adopting the Negro way of life” (Malik 1971:10). Today there is general agreement that Indians represent 40 percent of the population, and Blacks between 37 and 39 percent (depending on whether the “Mixed” sector is figured at 18 or 20 percent). In Guyana the figures on the demographic changes have been even more dramatic according to the 2002 census: Indians 43.5 percent, Blacks 30.2 percent, Mixed 16.7 percent, and Amerindians 9.1 percent (p. 162).

Beyond these statistics is economic power. To continue to call the Indians in either Trinidad and Tobago or Guyana “minorities”—as Malik and Bahadoorsingh did four decades ago—is to display gross ignorance of the accelerated economic rise of Indians as the new bourgeoisie. The much-quoted and mostly accurate Trinidadian political scientist Selwyn Ryan has been writing on the absence of entrepreneurial talents among the island’s black youth. He sees the exact opposite among young Indians and states the links between race, economic and political power, and corruption:

I share the widely held view that there is a change in the ethnic power structure and that the Indo-Trinidadian group is taking full advantage ... They have better entrepreneurial skill sets for doing trade and commerce ... They are also facilitated by a regime which desperately wants their supporters to get ahead and thus is rarely critical of entrepreneurial promiscuity.

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This holds for TT and arguably even more for Guyana. Such has been the rise of the Indian bourgeoisie that one of the conclusions of Percy Hintzen’s very solid book, that the contemporary “apex of power, privilege, prestige, status and wealth” in Trinidad is a dominant white (English and French) group (1989:21), has been overtaken by events. At least in terms of political and economic power that apex is now occupied by Indians and to a lesser extent, Syrian-Lebanese business people. That is a dimension that has yet to be fully researched for reasons that Ryan has been articulating for some time. Indians, he recently wrote, “now regard themselves as the new hegemons, those who have the responsibility for making over the economic, cultural and political landscape of Trinidad and Tobago, all in the name of ‘righting old wrongs.’” He then adds,
ominously “This too is a form of ethnic group hubris which is often at the root of wars of ‘culture’” (Ryan 2012:20).

The field of Indian studies is indeed rich but there is still much more to be researched.

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References